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Even Smoke Rising

JIM PANOS

STORIES OF MY PEOPLE

Since 1949 the purpose of Fellowship in Prayer is to promote the practice of prayer among all religious faiths whose fundamental belief is in God regardless of race, creed, or color, and whose tenets include the universal attributes of truth, honesty, justice, and mercy, that thereby there may arise a closer relation to Almighty God and a deeper spirit of fellowship among mankind.

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by Jim Panos
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JIM PANOS

Even Smoke Rising

STORIES OF MY PEOPLE

ILLUSTRATED BY ANN WOOLFOLK

To Keli

But Odysseus, yearning to see
even smoke rising from his own
land, hath a desire to die.

The Odyssey of Homer
Book I

CONTENTS

1.	Harry Paras: An American Life	**5**
2.	Mrs. Cleopatra	**12**
3.	Pater	**19**
4.	My Uncle Aurelius	**25**
5.	Old Man with Fisherman's Cap	**33**
6.	The Miracle	**40**
7.	Christina	**45**
8.	Constantin	**51**
9.	Cleon	**58**

The narrators of some of these short stories do not represent their author speaking in the first person, even as the characters in them do not represent real people, living or dead.

1.

HARRY PARAS: AN AMERICAN LIFE

It was a summer evening in 1912. Eight o'clock, and the sun was still out, a ball of fire resting on the rugged back of Taygetos. The hot breath of Sparta rose in the distance. Haralambos Paraskevopoulos trudged homeward from the fields behind his mule. He was tired and dirty. He smelled of his mule.

He found his father sipping *retsina* in the vine-covered patio of their house.

"They speak much of war," his father said.

"Yes."

Stripped to the waist, he washed at the outdoor pump, pumping with one hand and washing with the other, then changing hands. The water from the well was cool. He sat with his father, helping himself to wine.

"They will take you if there is war," his father said.

"Naturally."

They drank in silence. The ball of the sun dipped behind the old mountain. The evening settled, soft and purple.

"It would be wise for you to leave the country."

Haralambos started. "Leave the country? And where to go?"

His father shrugged. "To Europe . . . To America . . . ."

America! The sound of the word was magic.

"America?"

"It is the most safe place. America will never be in a war. Besides, we have many of ours there. The sons of Markos Dirvas are there. They can help you."

Haralambos was silent. He watched the purple mantle of the Laconian evening settling on the land.

"Do you not want to go?"

Did he not want to go? Who had been offered paradise and turned it down?

"Certainly, I want to go. But how do they get there? Money is needed."

"I have some money saved in a corner," his father said. "For your passage and small expenses. After — America has opportunities."

By the time Haralambos Paraskevopoulos was ready to leave, war with Turkey had broken out. He had to be smuggled out of Greece. He left with his father's money and his mother's blessing. Neither seemed to last very long.

Going to America for the first time is not like going to any other country. For you cannot go to America without the conviction that a new and better life awaits you there. You cannot go to America without a sense of impending rebirth. The feeling of the immigrant as he approaches its magic shores is a feeling that cannot be matched by any other. There is the quality of a dream about it — the quality of freedom and boundless hope. It is a pity that the native sons of America can never know what it means to go to America. If they could, they would be eternally grateful for having been born in America.

Haralambos Paraskevopoulos landed in New York with about fifty dollars in his pocket, though he never tired of proclaiming that he had arrived in America with exactly six dollars and seventy-three cents to his name. With the help of sign language, he found his way from a scribbled note to the Luxor Coffee Pot, the Dirvas brothers' place of business on West 56th Street, just a few blocks from the pier.

Plato and Jimmy Dirvas were glad to see someone from their village in the old country. Haralambos and Plato sat at a table to talk, while Jimmy attended to his work in the kitchen.

"How are things, down?" Plato said.

Haralambos gave him news of their family, friends, the war. Then he said, "You are well established here."

Plato Dirvas smiled broadly and lit a cigar. "I am opening a new place in a better neighborhood soon," he said. "Money grows on the trees in this land, if you know how to pick it."

Haralambos appraised the Dirvas establishment. It was small, but customers kept coming in.

"Have you a buyer for this store?" he said.

Plato snickered. "My brother Jimmy is taking it. But Jimmy has no brains for the busines. Jimmy has no brains at all. The restaurant will not be his for long."

Haralambos sensed an American opportunity. "Do you think Jimmy would take a partner?"

Then and there, he signed a note in favor of Plato Dirvas for seven hundred dollars. Of that, he paid twenty-five in cash. This arrangement pleased everyone concerned. Plato got seven hundred dollars for property he had written off. Jimmy Dirvas, who could not have run the place alone and knew it, now had a partner to lean on. And Haralambos Paraskevopoulos, fresh off the boat, was in business. America certainly was the land of opportunity.

Plato took him out to celebrate.

If your name is White or Brown or Jones, and always has been, you are a privileged man in America, for it is a good American name. But if your name is Haralambos Paraskevopoulos, and always has been, you are at a disadvantage in America, for it is not a good American name, and you must change it. Yet it is not an easy thing for a man to change his name, and that no White or Brown or Jones will ever know. It amounts to denying all that you hold in high esteem: the land of your birth, your father and mother, your very identity. Far

from being a simple formality, changing your name is a decision that requires determination and infinite courage.

Accordingly, Nikolai Popovitch becomes Nick Popov or Nicholas Pope in America; Baruch Wiseberg becomes Benny Wise or Benjamin Wilson; Antonio Karagianini becomes Tony Karani or Anthony Dwight; Aram Abrahamian becomes Archie Abrams or Arthur Street; and Haralambos Paraskevopoulos becomes Harry Paras or Harrison F. Parker, depending on the moral fortitude of the individual concerned.

And that is a good American name.

The partnership of Jimmy Dirvas and Harry Paras did not thrive. The Luxor Coffee Pot was too small an enterprise to warrant two proprietors. Jimmy was impossibly lazy and slow. Now that he was his own boss, he was more than ever content to do a minimum amount of work and let others grow rich. Harry had ambition. He was younger than his partner by ten years. He had dreams of making big money someday in America. They had been at it for a little more than one year, when Harry finally decided to get rid of his partner.

"Jimmy," he said, "the hour for us to part has come."

Jimmy stared. "Uhr . . . What do you want to say, Harry?"

"Do you buy me or do I buy you?"

Jimmy laughed. "H-how can I buy you, Harry? I have no money. I was buying my share from my brother, Plato, all the year. Uhr . . . I have no money."

Harry had been counting on that. He himself had not paid Plato Dirvas anything but the interest on his note. "Five hundred for your share, Jimmy," he said.

Jimmy laughed again. Then he blew up. He fumed and cursed. Harry was adamant. Jimmy took his problem to his brother. Plato was well set by then. His place downtown was making good money.

"Take the five hundred," he advised.

Jimmy Dirvas took the five hundred. He agreed to stay on as cook at the Luxor. Harry paid him seventeen dollars a week. Jimmy was content.

Harry Paras had reasons to be very pleased with his first year in America.

The immigrant is a tree without roots in America. He comes a stranger to this land, and a stranger he lives and dies in it. He never knows the feeling of the native: that this land is his very own. Strive as he may, he can never possess that feeling. After acquiring his good American name, he becomes a citizen of the United States of America, but still the feeling of the alien sets him apart. He is forever a marked man — a foreigner. His life is limited by the circle of his own kind. He chooses his friends from among his compatriots. His world is his community, isolated and small, a walled place on the broad face of the land. Though he has come thousands of miles from the country of his birth, he has, in a sense, not left it for a single moment.

When it comes time to marry and raise a family, he chooses his mate from his own people. He knows that, if he should marry a native, the day will surely

come when his wife will call him a damn Russian or Pollack or Greek or whatever the case may be. He has witnessed that time and time again and wants no part of it. He picks a girl who has come from his own country. If there is none available, he sends for one.

And the immigrant marries and bears American children. It is only then that, through his children, through the blood of his blood, he has at last established roots in America. But even then he is doomed not to feel at home. His roots are not like the roots of others, for they lie in the future, and that can never be his own.

The Dirvas brothers had a sister, Froso. It was not until 1916 that Harry Paras set eyes on her. He saw her at church one Sunday and decided that there was a girl to grace a man's home and warm his bed. Besides, she would probably bring a good dowry with her.

He went to see Plato Dirvas the next day.

"I saw your sister in the church yesterday," he said over a drink.

Plato understood at once. He raised his glass in a long drink, lowered it to the table and gave a long sigh of pleasure.

"Froso is a pretty girl," he said at length.

Harry agreed.

"I think that her hour to marry has come. It is not good for a girl of her age to remain unmarried. Many things happen in this country. We are no longer in Greece."

Harry agreed.

"I am looking for a husband for her. He must be a good Greek boy with a business. Froso is used to having everything she needs, you know. She must not be deprived of anything."

Harry agreed.

"Do you want to marry my sister?" Plato said.

"For that I came to see you," Harry said.

Plato grinned. "Well, I do not see why not. You are young. You have a business. You have no debts," he said, alluding to the note Harry had long since paid off on the Luxor. "And Jimmy says that your businesses go well. You must have money in the bank."

"Yes."

"How much?"

"About three thousand."

"Good," Plato said, "because, as you know, dowries are not of fashion in America."

Harry was invited to the Dirvas home one evening that same week to meet his intended. Plato and Jimmy and he sat talking and smoking in the parlor. Then Froso came in and was introduced. She smiled and blushed and kept her brown eyes lowered. She sat with the men for a while, saying little more than yes or no, and then left. Plato followed her out. He returned with a broad grin on his fat face.

They were married early in 1917. They went traditionally to Niagara Falls

for their honeymoon and came back to a house Harry had bought in Astoria. There they lived until America entered the war and Harry got his call. Froso waited for him while he fought for his adopted country as a cook with the expeditionary forces in France. On his return, he decided to start a family. In October, 1919, Froso bore him a son. It was stillborn.

After the war, the immigrant could look the native American in the eye without flinching. He had fought for his country. He felt more like an American now than his citizenship papers could ever make of him. He came home from the war convinced that he was every bit as good as the next American. He settled down to making the most of the opportunities the country had to offer. For now the American people as a whole, and not the isolated immigrant alone, had to find a place in the country's future. The promise that America had held for him at the start but never quite fulfilled would surely find its fulfillment now. Surely.

For Froso Paras, marriage was a strictly love-honor-and-obey proposition. Obey Harry she did, for he would not have it otherwise. Honor him she did of her own volition, for she was a woman of virtue. And love him she did. Harry's concept of marriage was masculine. His wife was there to keep his house and cater to him. While he filled her whole life, she was only a part of his. The balance was his store.

"How goes the business, Harlambe?" she asked him in bed one night.

She felt his head snap towards her in the dark.

"The business? Since when are you interested in the business?"

"Since we married. You never talk to me about the store, and you are there all the day. I do not even know how much money we have. Are we rich or are we poor? I do not know."

Harry laughed. "Work is the worry of the man. But, since you ask, we are not poor and we are not rich. But one day we will be rich. One day I will have as much money as your brother Plato — and more."

"Naturally," she said, resting her head on his chest.

"Soon I will sell the Luxor," he went on. "I found a nice place on Ninth Avenue. I will make twice the money there."

"What will you call it?"

"Eh? What will I call it? I do not know. It is not important."

"It is important. A nice place must have a nice name, like . . . ."

"Yes. Go ahead. Be the godmother."

"A Greek name: Parthenon."

Harry thought about the name. "Parthenon . . . Parthenon . . . Beautiful name."

She was glad. The name would remind him of her all day.

"But enough about business from you, woman. What does a woman know about business? A woman is good for only one thing."

"What?" Froso asked naively.

Not until it was too late did Froso Paras discover that she had cancer. Frantic, Harry sent her to the best specialists in the city. They all agreed there

was no hope. He sent her to Johns Hopkins. There she lost one of her lungs. It was not long before the other was gone. In the fall of 1923, she died her agonizing death, hardly as old as the century.

Harry Paras turned to making money with a vengeance after his wife's death. The Parthenon Lunch turned out to be a gold mine. The years were good and money easy. He invested it shrewdly. He showed a knack for picking the right stocks. Making money became his sole interest in life. It did not quite fill the void the loss of his wife and baby had left in his heart, but it did give him a sense if importance and accomplishment that gratified him.

Plato Dirvas, by then married and father of several chidren, well on his way to being one of the wealthiest Greeks in New York, soon came to look on Harry as a man to consider. He was a frequent visitor at the Parthenon.

"I learn that you are playing the market and doing very well," he said to his brother-in-law.

"Yes," Harry said, "and that is something for you to do."

Plato shook his big head. "I do not believe in the market. The bootlegging is better. But you are a smart man and you know what you do. You will get ahead."

Harry was flattered. He called a waitress and ordered two drinks in coffee cups. It was the lull of the afternoon. The store was empty.

"That girl is like the cold water," Plato said, leering.

"But she is also very warm," Harry said.

They grinned, knowing men both. They drank to each other's health. After a long silence, Plato said, "Charalambe, you should have married again. You have Laconian blood in your veins. Even now it is not too late".

Harry did not look up from his drink. "No," he said. "No." Then he said, "I am still married."

In 1929, Harry Paras went the way of the enterprising American. He lost everything in the crash. It was a hard blow — one from which he was never to recover. He had lost his boy, his wife, and now his fortune. He was a beaten man. America had forsaken him. Doggedly, he put on his white apron and went back to his legacy of hard work at the Parthenon Lunch, unhappy and alone in an alien land, sustained by the immigrant's ultimate hope that, someday, he would make enough dollars to go back and spend his last days in the land of his birth. He worked hard, earned a pittance, developed varicose veins and, in the end, died in America.

On the day he died, Harry Paras got up early. It was to be his first day on his feet. He had been bedridden for three weeks with a painful, debilitating attack of varicose veins. His doctor had told him to take it easy for a few days, not to exert himself, certainly not to go back to work. He had explained, in gory detail, that any strenuous activity might release deadly clots of blood, formed by prolonged inactivity in the weakened veins of his legs, that could travel through his system to block the flow of blood to his heart. But Harry Paras, bored, lonely, aching to escape the prison of his sick bed, went back to work that bright, brisk November day in total ignorance of his fate. If anything, it was a day of renewal and hope. Going back to the Parthenon Lunch

was a homecoming he could not put off any longer, for he had no home other than his store, no love other than his business.

But the day was fraught with excruciating pain for him. He let the help go an hour early, locked the front door, put out the dome lights and collapsed in a rear booth in the half-light. Sitting, he felt better. He had a cheese sandwich and a glass of milk. Then he felt well enough to have a cup of coffee, even a cigarette. That relaxed him even more.

In the near darkness of the store and the curling smoke of his cigarette, the painful day assumed an unreal, ethereal quality. He was transported, as in a dream, across the years and the broad reaches of the earth, to his native village in the foothills of Taygetos. He was having, not a cup of coffee, but a glass of *retsina* on the vine-covered patio of his house, as the old mountain turned lavender with the setting sun. He knew a long, drawn moment of peace. Even when the massive embolism struck and made him grab for breath and tear the collar of his shirt and writhe with the burning pain in his chest, he was sitting peacefully on the patio of his boyhood home, watching the quiet sunset.

When they found Haralambos Paraskevopoulos slumped forward in that rear booth of the Parthenon Lunch the next morning, no one could tell that he had attained the dream of the immigrant in America. He had, in the end, returned to the land of his birth.

2.

MRS. CLEOPATRA

It was nice, Cleopatra Papazoglou thought, to be alone in the apartment as the light of day faded, sitting by her window, watching the people on the street below bend into the rising wind. It gave her a warm, homey feeling she never had when Victoria was home. Victoria always made her presence felt in small, annoying ways, even when they were alone in their separate rooms. She would shuffle about, her loose, blackless slippers clacking on the linoleum floor, or shift in her creaky rocking chair or cough that mucous bronchial cough of hers — and the warm, homey feeling would be gone.

She decided to sit a while longer by the window, to prolong those few precious moments of solitude, knowing that she would soon have to start supper, knowing too that Victoria would soon be home. Victoria . . . She stretched her legs before her to their full length and raised them, not without wincing, a few inches off the floor, feeling the numbness drain slightly from them as she did so. Neon lights winked on along the street, pink and yellow and green and a garish purple. The street began to assume its night look. The supermarket on the other side was busy with evening shoppers. Traffic was brisk with cars, now heralded by their probing headlights. A bus went by. She craned her neck to follow it as long as she could. She loved buses. They were bursts of excitement in her life, especially when they had to stop for a red light at the corner and then start up with a roar of their motors that made her window panes rattle. The jarring noises were particularly welcome in the middle of her wakeful nights, when they reached her as a reassurance of life itself in the face of the fearful uncertainties of the darkness about her.

She tried to remember how the street had looked when she first saw it from that window, and couldn't. It seemed as if it had not changed at all — it had changed that imperceptibly, in dropping frames of time, as in a silent motion picture. Even the more obvious changes in storefronts and the shapes of automobiles and fashions in people's clothing were gradual and stealthy, and she accepted them, hardly aware that they had occurred at all. But the frames of time had kept dropping through the years, the motion picture unfolding, and the street scene had changed, and so had she. She — had aged.

Yes, she had aged. She could remember as far back as 1914. How many years? Sixty? More. She could remember more than half a century. She could remember Smyrna in 1914, when Smyrna was Greek, before Smyrna became Izmir. Izmir . . . She grimaced. Smyrna would always be Smyrna to her.

She was a little girl then. She remembered the days of her girlhood in

Smyrna, and a smile settled lightly on her lips . . . Her father, her mother, her three brothers . . . Her father's house, standing like a white castle in its garden, enclosed by a high wall. How she loved that house, that garden! To lie under the fruit trees . . . to pluck the ripe figs right off their branches . . . to pass from the summer heat into the cool embrace of the house. She remembered the house at Eastertime, the loveliest time of year . . . The *Epitafios,* winding through the streets of Smyrna on Good Friday evening, followed by hundreds of faithful holding lighted candles, mourning the death of the Lord. Then the Resurrection service the following night, when the whole city rang with joy. She remembered carrying home the light from the Resurrection and marking the sign of the cross in smoke on the overhead jams of all the doors of the house, blessing it for the year to come. And the midnight feast after forty days of fasting. . . .

And then, in a flash, without wanting to, she remembered the nightmare of the uprising. The slaying in the streets . . . the decapitations . . . the bloodbath . . . the frantic flight to the sea. Thousands of people in their night clothes, fleeing the wrath of the infidels. The mad scramble for the boats to Tsesme. People falling off, being pushed off, and drifting or drowning. She remembered vividly, as if it were outside her window now, her last view of Smyrna as the boat pulled out, burning red-orange against the night sky all the way to Chios — all of Asia Minor seemed to be on fire.

In Chios, she found herself an orphan and alone.

Cleopatra Papazoglou shivered. She crossed herself for the souls of her family. Always, she would start out recalling the happy days in Smyrna and always, always the ugly ones followed. Happy memories were fleeting and rare. Her memories of Smyrna always lost out to the ugly ones. Her memories of America, sadly, were not happy ones. How can you be happy in an alien land? There was little to remember that was happy in America. She had had to work all her life, work from dawn to dusk, sewing furs for the rich, earning little more than her livelihood. Her hands had grown coarse and cracked from the needle, her eyes weak from the close work. And what did she have to show for her years in America? Happiness? No. Old age. Loneliness. A few social security checks, saved against the day when Smyrna would be Greek again, when she could return to her father's house.

She rose to her feet slowly, painfully, supporting her slight frame on the arms of her chair. Her knees felt weak beneath her as she stood up. It was some time before she ventured to walk. She unlocked her door, stepped testily into Victoria's room and paused to lock the door behind her. There was a smell in the room, a smell that meant Victoria to her. She wondered if her room smelled of herself, and if Victoria identified it with her, but that was unlikely, for Victoria hardly ever — except by special invitation — went into her room. It was one of Victoria's constant complaints that she had far more privacy than herself — to say nothing of the view from her window. Victoria's room was windowless. But she really had no cause to complain because, after all, who was it that paid the extra three dollars on the rent, month in and month out?

But Victoria Makrides was a constant complainer. She quarreled with her clothes, as the saying went. What could you expect from mainland Greeks? They lacked the good humor of the Greeks from Asia Minor. Moreover, Victoria came from Sparta — in the *Peloponnese*. What could you expect from *Peloponnesians?* Well . . . Their living together was just a marriage of convenience, she concluded bitterly — two spinster ladies looking for companionship and someone to share the rent.

It was not quite dark yet in the kitchen. A grey light seeped in from the window on the shaft between apartment houses. She could still do her work without turning on the light. Electricity was an item these days. She opened the refrigerator door and blinked into the cave of sudden light. She surveyed the supplies on her two shelves: butter, eggs, half a quart of milk, a head of lettuce wrapped in saran-wrap, some leftover chicken. Deciding what to eat was a problem. She made it a point to take a light meal in the evening. Tonight she thought she might have an egg or maybe two, no, just one, and a glass of milk — just enough to keep body and soul together. She took an egg from its container and the half quart of milk. She also took out the head of lettuce, but then, changing her mind, quickly put it back and shut the refrigerator door.

She poured some milk into a chipped white porcelain pot and put it on a slow flame to take the chill out of it. She filled another pot half with water, dropped the egg carefully into it and placed it on another burner. Then she started to recite the Lord's Prayer to herself, half aloud, her lips forming each sacred word. When she had finished saying the prayer twice, she took the milk off the fire and poured it into a cup without a saucer. Still reciting, she spread a faded blue and white checkered cloth on the kitchen table.

". . . and deliver us from evil. Amen." Her egg was ready. She knew of no better way to time her eggs than by reciting the Lord's Prayer four times — to say nothing of the spiritual benefits involved. She had learned that in Smyrna, from her mother. She sat down to eat, glad that Victoria was not home yet. She didn't feel up to asking her to supper tonight. But as she took her first bite, she heard Victoria's familiar step on the stairs, leading heavily with her right foot as she climbed. Presently she heard her key in the lock, and Victoria was framed in the doorway, a shoebox tucked tightly under one arm.

She bought another pair of shoes, she thought.

"Good evening, Mrs. Victoria," she said.

Victoria started, "Ah, you frightened me, blessed one!" she cried. "What are you doing in the dark?"

"Eating."

Victoria flicked on the dome light. "*I* could not see to peel that egg in the dark," she said.

"It was not that dark yet," she said, irked. "But thank you, it is better with the light."

Victoria went to her room.

"Come to have one bite with me, Mrs. Victoria," she called after her.

"No, thank you much, Mrs. Cleopatra," Victoria called back. "I want to quiet a little before I eat. I am tired from the shopping."

"Oh, you shopped?"

"Yes, I bought a pair of shoes."

"Truth? You must show them to me."

"With pleasure, Mrs. Cleopatra."

She finished her supper and touched her lips with a paper napkin. Then, carefully, she folded it twice and smoothed it out. She took her dishes to the sink and washed them.

Familiar, violent Spanish voices rose across the shaft. They are quarreling again, she thought.

"They are quarreling again," Victoria said, drifting into the kitchen in her bathrobe and slippers.

"I do not understand how she can stand her in the house," she said.

"Who?"

"The daughter-in-law. I do not understand how the daughter-in-law can stand the mother-in-law in the house. It does not fit in my head."

"It is the apartment of the mother-in-law, that is why," Victoria said.

"Well, if it is the apartment of the mother-in-law, then the daughter-in-law should move out with her husband."

"And the money?" Victoria said. "It is much cheaper to live with the mother-in-law."

"Regardless," she insisted. "I prefer to pay my own rent than to live with such a woman in the same house."

"Maybe it is the fault of the daughter-in-law."

"Regardless. The daughter-in-law should move out with her husband — for the good of their happiness."

They were silent for a moment, listening.

"Pity we do not understand what they say," Victoria said.

"Yes. Then we would know whose fault it is."

She put her supper things away in her cabinet and the slightly used napkin in its box. The evening's chores were done. She gave a little sigh of relief.

"So now. Let us see your new shoes, Mrs. Victoria," she said.

"With pleasure," Victoria said, pleased that she had asked.

They went into Victoria's room.

"Sit in the rocking chair, Mrs. Cleopatra," Victoria said, lighting a floor lamp beside it. "Just as in your house."

"Thank you."

Victoria crouched and reached the shoebox from under the bed, untied and unwrapped it, and there were her new shoes. They were a plain, ugly black pump, really, with a heel much too high, she thought, for a woman Victoria's age. But these Peloponnesians never had any taste. If she paid more than eight-fifty for them, she thought, she didn't get a bargain. Besides, she didn't need another pair of shoes — she already had three.

"Oh, Mrs. Victoria!" she cried. "How beautiful! Superb!"

"And only ten and ninety-nine. They were twelve and twenty-five."

"Only?"

"Only."

They admired the shoes for a while. Then, handling them with infinite tenderness, Victoria put them back into the box, wrapped and tied it and placed it under her bed again.

"Listen . . . ," she said.

"What is it?" Victoria said.

"The son came — and he is taking the part of his wife."

"Beautiful. So it must."

"Yes."

They listened to the argument which was gaining force by the minute.

"He is a man, though . . ."

"Yes — yes!"

She would have loved to stay and hear the argument to its usual conclusion, when he would storm out and slam the door behind him, but she didn't want to overstay her welcome. It would only obligate her needlessly to Victoria.

"Well, back to my little corner," she said, rising carefully from the unsteady rocker.

"Thank you for the visit, Mrs. Cleopatra. How I envy you! You had your supper. You washed your dishes. And now you will sit at your window and watch the outside world."

Was there a note of resentment in Victoria's voice? Well, that was just too bad.

"Come, maybe tomorrow you will eat first," she said, avoiding any reference to the view from her window.

"Maybe, maybe, Mrs. Cleopatra."

She let herself into her room and locked the door behind her. She stood by her window in the dark, hugging herself, for a drawn moment. The supermarket was closed and deserted. A car went by in a frantic hurry. The few stragglers on the street seemed to have been left there by mistake. The wind was much stronger now, making the hanging store signs swing wildly from their hinges. She looked eagerly for a bus in both directions, but there was none coming. She turned from the desolate street scene and settled into her chair. She heard Victoria moving about in the kitchen, getting her supper. She heard the clatter of dishes and Victoria's phlegmy cough. She shivered slightly, but not from the cold. Tears welled in her eyes. She was weary tonight. Weary and . . . old.

"Mrs. Cleopatra? . . ."

Victoria was knocking lightly on her door. Now what could she want?

"Coming, Mrs. Victoria," she said, rising with effort.

She opened the door ajar.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Cleopatra," Victoria said. "Come and take a coffee with me."

"*Coffee?* No, thank you very much, Mrs. Victoria. If I have a coffee now, my eyes will be like shrimps all night," she said. She should know, after all these years, she thought. "Anyway, thank you. And — good night," she added firmly. She closed the door and locked it and sank into her chair by the window.

Tired, exhausted, she leaned far back and shut her eyes. With her eyes

shut, she saw the garden of her father's house in summer, saw it clearly, in all detail. With her eyes shut, she smiled and reached up and plucked a ripe fig from a tree. Slowly, deliberately, prolonging the sweet anticipation, she started to peel it, turning back the dark skin, revealing the lush white meat underneath. Starting at the nipple at the top, she peeled the fruit neatly into limp triangles that hung like petals over her dainty girl's fingers. And then, just as she was about to bite into it at last, her mouth drooling, a bus roared past on the street below, rattling her window panes and shattering the lovely vision of her girlhood.

She sat limp and listless in her chair, aware of the pulsating neon light on the closed lids of her eyes, aware, too, of the stealthy passing of time. Time dropped in slow and gentle frames as in a silent motion picture. The frames of time, she knew, would keep dropping, as always, through the night, the silent motion picture unfolding into morning, and tomorrow would be a brand new day, a day when Smyrna would be Greek once again, and she, Cleopatra Papazoglou, could go back to her father's house at long last.

3.

PATER

Father Vrionis was a priest of the Greek Orthodox Church. Father Gregorios Vrionis — straight out of Byzantium.

There was nothing watered-down about his priesthood — no turned-backed collar and clerical grey and a bare face for him. He wore his hair long, combed into a tidy, lemon-sized bun at the nape of his neck and crowned by his black *calimafche*, the Lincolnesque headgear worn by his ancestors since the very founding of his church. His face was hardly visible for all the hair: arching, bushy eyebrows, a wealth of greying beard that started as the outgrowth of his sideburns and wound up a breastplate to his portly middle. He stood a natural six feet from the ground. Swathed in flowing black robes of rustling sharkskin, he cut a formidable, pyramidal figure. He was religion incarnate. He was faith itself. To a little boy like me, he was God.

And he had eyes — eyes like charcoal briquettes, black and set deep in their sockets, cushioned in the forest of his eyebrows and beard and ready to flare into the fires of hell at the slightest infringement of a commandment. When he held you with those eyes, you had no choice but to submit to their soul-stripping power: you had to confess, you had to repent. Otherwise, lightning would flash from them and strike you dead if you hadn't done your homework for Greek school or if you had made the mistake of speaking English in one of his classes.

He also had ears.

"Demetrios!" he roared.

He had been talking to a higher grade of students at the front of the classroom while our grade was busy copying Greek texts, so I thought it safe to whisper something in English to my seatmate — just whisper, mind you.

"*Pater?*" I said, jumping to attention.

He strode down the aisle like a tornado.

"Did I hear you talking to Stellios in the English?" he demanded, the briquettes burning.

"Yes, *Pater,*" I said, my boy's inclination to lie failing me.

The fire in his eyes diminished.

"Shame, Demetrios," he said in a kindlier tone. "You come here to learn the beautiful, the glorious Greek, and you speak an alien tongue." He shook his head reproachfully, never taking his eyes off me.

That was all. He turned and rustled to the front of the room. I sank to my desk, crushed.

They don't make priests like Father Vrionis anymore. Of course, that was many years ago, almost half a century ago, when I was growing up, the young son of immigrant parents in America. Things are different today. Greek Orthodox priests look and act like their Protestant and Catholic counterparts. They call themselves Father John, Father George, Father William, and wear tailored black suits and clerical collars. If I were a boy today, there is not one among them I might mistake for God. Moreover, Father Vrionis was my priest at the church of St. Gregorios. It was my first church. I had been baptized there. I served as an altar boy there. I went to Greek school there. To me, the church of St. Gregorios was the only church — and Father Vrionis its patron saint.

The aura of sainthood descended upon the person of Father Vrionis visibly each Sunday morning as he conducted the liturgy. Standing in the Holy Gate, resplendent in glittering gold vestments and crown, he seemed yet another sacred figure in the line of four ikons that flanked him to form the partition between the nave of the church and the Holy Sanctum behind it. To his right was a life-size painting of Jesus Christ, praying at Gethsemane on the eve of His crucifixion, and one of the Virgin Mary, receiving the Holy Spirit from a radiant white dove hovering high in the heavens. To his left stood the patron saint, his namesake, St. Gregorios, in full panoply, and beyond him a magnificent ikon of mine, St. Demetrios, which always made me proud to bear his name. Father Vrionis, even in the midst of such divine company, fairly shone.

As an altar boy, I was privy to the innermost aspects of his priesthood. I was witness when, behind closed doors in the Holy Sanctum, he knelt and prayed in silence; when he invoked the Lord's blessing in secret, mumbled tones, crossing himself profusely with broad sweeps of his right arm; when he offered incense from his silver burner at the four sides of the altar; when, especially, he transformed the bread and wine in the gold chalice into the body and blood of Christ.

I felt I was part of the mystery of religion when, in the company of the other altar boys, I followed Father Vrionis bearing the chalice to his flock for Communion. I would stand beside him with bowed head, holding a candle often larger than myself, as the faithful came forward to receive. They would take hold of a corner of the scarlet cloth under the gold chalice and place it like a napkin to their chins and prompt him with their Christian names: Alexandra . . . Eleftherios . . . Eleni . . . . He would then intone: "The servant of God, Eleni, receives Communion in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" and deposit a morsel of sacrament carefully into their waiting mouths with a gold spoon. At such moments, I should not have been surprised to see a halo shimmering gloriously above his head.

The good Father tended his flock with singular devotion. He made it his unfailing duty to call on his parishioners at home from time to time, especially on occasions important to them. He visited us without fail on my nameday, the holiday of St. Demetrios, each October 26th. He would take the five flights of stairs to our walk-up railroad apartment in a paced, determined stride, and

march into our house, his black robes swishing through the narrow hall, my mother bowing and scraping in his wake.

"Many years, Demetrios!" he would cry, placing his hand on my head and reciting a fast prayer under his breath. Dutifully, I would kiss his proffered right hand.

In honor of the occasion, we would sit in our rarely used parlor. He inquired after the health and welfare of each of us and made small talk until my mother brought out the ceremonial tray. It always held the same items: a glass of cold water, already poured, for each person present; a deep dish of homemade preserves — quince, sour cherries, watermelon rind or vanillin; enough teaspoons to go round, arranged neatly on their sides to fit into one another; and rye whiskey in crystal glasses, like the water already poured, for the adults. She would start with Father Vrionis, who would help himself to some preserve, wash it down with a glass of water, deposit his used spoon in his discarded glass and exclaim his satisfaction. Then, at my mother's insistence, he would take a glass of whiskey, wish me, "And next year!" and toss it off.

Then he would rise to leave, adjusting his *calimafche*, making a colossus of himself in our tiny parlor. My mother would take his right hand to kiss in farewell and press a coin or two into his palm as she bent over it. Unaccountably, I would cringe at the sight of the holy man accepting a tip like — like my father, who was a waiter.

The custom of tipping priests persists to this day, despite the fact that, in these far more affluent times, priests command respectable salaries. The custom jars me still. To my way of thinking, religion and money don't mix. Did not Jesus chase the moneychangers from the temple? When I must tip a priest at baptisms, weddings or funerals, I conceal the bills (no longer coins) in an envelope, seal it hermetically, hand it to him surreptitiously — and beat a hasty retreat.

Growing up in those years when Father Vrionis held sway was a special thing. I was the first in my family to be born in America. My parents, fearful that I might drift away from my heritage in a strange land, were determined that I and, later, my two brothers should maintain our national ties to their native Greece at all costs. There were two hard and fast rules in our house: church every Sunday morning and Greek school every weekday afternoon.

Greek school came at the end of the normal school day, when the other boys in the neighborhood had a couple of hours to play in the streets. We were, then, an oddity as we made our way to the church with our Greek books in hand. We were taunted and jeered mercilessly: "Greaseballs! Greaseballs!" We were forced to respond in kind: "Dago! Nigger! Jewboy!" At times, there were pitched battles in the streets. We would arrive at the basement of the church dishevelled, knickers sagging, caps askew, panting and sweating — and then had to deal with Father Vrionis.

Fortunately, his displeasure was tempered with leniency when he heard that our disreputable appearance was the result of the defense of the Greek

honor. For he was fiercely Greek. He spent as much of our valuable time in Greek school teaching us the glory of our heritage as the rudiments of the language. "Never forget, my children," he would bellow. "Never forget that the Greeks gave the light of civilization to the whole world. You come from a noble race — the race of Homer and Plato and Karaiskakis and Constantine the Great! You must be proud of your Greek heritage!" He went on and on, brimming with patriotism, assuaging the injury of our pride, transforming our shame into a feeling of nobility and grandeur. His dedication to Greece was second only to his dedication to God.

Inevitably, we lost Father Vrionis. He was summoned to assist the Patriarch in Constantinople. It was a shock to our community. When he introduced his replacement — a puny little priest with pop eyes and a thin goatee — during his last service at St. Gregorios, grown men wept. When he said goodbye at his last class in Greek school, his eyes brimmed with tears, and so did ours. We filed silently past him to kiss his right hand for the last time.

It was then that he took me aside.

"Demetrios," he said, "I need a good helper when the other boys leave. Do you want to stay and help me?"

"Oh, yes, *Pater,*" I said eagerly.

When the others had gone, we went upstairs to the church office. It was a dingy cubbyhole off the entrance, housing a couple of steel filing cabinets, a large table that served as the secretary's desk, and a huge iron safe on wheels that made the floor sag under it. Father Vrionis crouched at the safe and manipulated the combination with professional skill. The door swung open easily. He reached inside and removed a bulging brown bag. It was so heavy that he had to use both hands and strain to lift it out. Then he closed and locked the safe and led me into the church.

We sat on the first bench on the right, facing the ikons of the saints Gregorios and Demetrios. Father Vrionis rested the bag with a thud between us on the bench and cast a furtive glance about the empty church. It was late afternoon. The light from the high windows was dull and grey. Some candles burning by the Holy Gate gave off a timid yellow glow. Father Vrionis unlocked the bag with a small key and opened it.

It was full of coins: hundreds of coins — pennies, nickels, half-dollars, quarters, dimes — dumped into the bag in one great big mess. Instantly, I recalled my mother pressing a tip into his right hand. Unaccountably, I cringed.

Father Vrionis turned the bag upside down and emptied the coins carefully on the bench. He lowered the empty bag to the floor and contemplated his treasure. A small smile played on his lips.

"My dear Demetrios," he said. "These monies are the reward of many years' work in this alien land." He paused to glance lovingly at his treasure again. "Now that I leave, we must sort and count them carefully and wrap them in these papers," he went on, taking a supply of coin wrappers from a pocket in the folds of his tunic, "and exchange them at the bank for dollars to take with me to Constantinople."

"Yes, *Pater.*" I said.

We set to our task. We sorted, counted and arranged the coins in stacks of forty nickels, forty quarters and twenty half-dollars preparatory to wrapping them. His hands were working near my own, dwarfing them. They had short white hairs on the backs and in the spaces between the knuckles. Tiny drops of perspiration glistened like a fine dew among the hairs. And then I noticed that his hands had started to tremble.

Startled, I looked up into his face. It was bathed in perspiration. Large beads of sweat formed on his high forehead at the line of his hair and trickled down his face to water the roots of his beard and vanish down the walls of his neck. His eyes were ablaze.

"*Pater* . . ." I started.

He fairly jumped. His busy, trembling hands jerked out of control, upsetting several stacks of coins. They fell like dominoes. They rolled away in every direction all over the floor.

"Demetrios!" Father Vrionis cried, springing to his feet. "Quick! Kneel — kneel! We must find every nickel!"

I dropped obediently to my hands and knees and started to pick up coins. Father Vrionis did likewise. On all fours in his loose black robes, he looked like a grotesque, predatory animal. We worked on our hands and knees, crawling in among and under the benches, up near the ikons, in dark corners, at the very threshold of the Holy Gate, under the ever-watchful eyes of the saints, until every coin had been retrieved.

We rose to our feet. We faced each other in silence. Large patches of dirt had been stamped on Father's robe. I stooped and slapped it clean for him. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his drenched forehead.

"The God was with us," he said at length. "I think we found all of the monies."

We sat on the bench and resumed our work. As time passed and more and more coins were counted, wrapped and stacked in the bag, Father Vrionis became more and more nervous, more and more agitated. He perspired more. His hands trembled more. His breath became labored and loud. His whole frame shook.

Then we were through. Father Vrionis put the last of the money into the bag and closed and locked it. A quarter and a dime, left over from the count, caught the fading light of day on the empty bench. He picked them up absently and made as if to put them away, when suddenly he became aware of my presence. He smiled. The task done, he relaxed visibly.

"You were such a good helper, Demetraki," he said affectionately in his familiar, kindly voice, "that I am giving you these."

He handed me the quarter and the dime. I took them mechanically.

"And I thank you much," he said. "Go with the blessing of the God."

He extended his right hand. I took it and put it to my lips and tasted the salt on the damp, white hairs. I turned and hurried out of the church.

I rushed into the fresh, cold air of the evening. I took a deep, deep breath. I walked to the corner. I stopped for a red light. I was still holding the quarter

and the dime. I opened my palm and looked at them. In the glow of the traffic light, they were red. I felt them burning my hand. I threw them away — I threw them away as hard as I could.

The light turned green. I bolted across the street. I burst into a wild, mad run. I ran and ran. I ran and ran and, unaccountably, I cried — I cried . . . .

4.

MY UNCLE AURELIUS

When I was a boy, I went to live with my Uncle Aurelius and my Aunt Agatha in Montreal, Canada. I went to live with my Canadian relatives, whom I had never seen, because my parents had lost their lives in an automobile accident in New York, where I was born. What impressed me most on first meeting my uncle was that, unlike my father, he spoke English fluently, without a trace of the immigrant's accent. As my father's brother, he was, of course, Greek, but my aunt was Scottish Canadian, and that, I suspect, accounted for his superior English.

My aunt and uncle welcomed me warmly, for they had never been blessed with children of their own. Most people took their generosity at face value, since I had been left alone in the world and was, after all, family. But there were those who attributed ulterior motives to it, since I had also been left heir to my parents' modest worldly possessions, which included a rather immodest double indemnity insurance policy in my name. The fact of the matter is that my aunt and uncle's way of life never showed any outward signs of new affluence in the years I lived under their roof.

We lived on the top floor of a three-story walk-up on Saint Lawrence Boulevard. It was a dismal business area with trams clanging after one another day and night. The street locations were stores, with two floors of railroad apartments above them. These were reached by an outdoor staircase leading up to a landing. The door to the second-floor apartment was on the left side of the landing and could not be seen from the street below. The door to ours faced the boulevard squarely.

That architectural fact was of great import to me, for it made it possible to tell from across the street whether or not my uncle was home. For my Uncle Aurelius had an unfailing habit of never closing the door properly. The lock was old and the door itself difficult, requiring considerable effort to close it, and nothing requiring undue effort was ever close to my uncle's heart.

So it was that, when I got home for lunch that January noon, I knew from afar that my uncle was home. I pushed the door open, entered, and closed and locked it behind me. Then I sat on the last step of the indoor staircase that led to our apartment to remove my boots, for my uncle would never tolerate my entering the house with muddy boots. I found my aunt and uncle in the kitchen, where we did most of our living. I placed my boots in the sink, where my uncle had already deposited his for my aunt to clean.

"Did you lock the door behind you, boy?" he said, looking down at me through his thick glasses. My uncle was a large man with a body shaped like a huge pear: broad at the middle, at my eye level, tapering off to narrow shoulders at a height of just under six feet. His head was large and bulbous, with loose layers of fat bunched at his neck, like a collar, as he looked down at me. A soggy, burnt-out cigar stub, jammed firmly into his mouth, was a permanent feature of his face.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"'Good. Always make sure to lock that door. I have a very valuable stamp collection in my study, you know."

"Lunch is ready," my Aunt Agatha said. "Did you wash your hands, boy?"

"No," I said, and did.

If my Uncle Aurelius was built like a pear, my Aunt Agatha was built like a string bean. She was slim, slight, long and wiry. Her hair, in spite of her years, was jet black. Her eyes were round, large and olive, giving her an overall olive complexion.

"How about you?" she said to my uncle. "Did you wash your hands?"

"Why, sure, I did," my uncle protested, holding his hands up for her to see.

My aunt said nothing to that. To me, she said, "Boy, go fetch my sweater from the parlor. It's chilly in here," which was strange, because it was quite warm in the kitchen.

When I got back with the sweater, my Uncle Aurelius was drying his hands on the kitchen towel.

"Allright, sit down, both of you," my aunt said, tossing the sweater over the back of her chair.

"Well, boy," my uncle said, "what did they teach you in school this morning?"

I told him we had studied reading, spelling and arithmetic.

"Arithmetic, eh? And what did they teach you about arithmetic?"

"Sums."

"Sums, eh? Good — a very useful thing. Do you know how much 160 and 175 make?"

"No."

"You don't?" my Uncle Aurelius boomed. "What kind of arithmetic do they teach you if you don't know how much 160 and 175 make?"

My aunt came to my rescue. "The boy has plenty of time for that, Aurelius. I bet you don't know how much they make, yourself."

"Who doesn't?"

"You don't. Quick — how much is 160 and 175?"

"Why — er . . . 315."

My aunt and uncle were silent, she in defeat, he in triumph, and so was I, in sheer admiration. Right away, my uncle had said 315! Later, when I put 160

and 175 on paper and added them up as I had learned in school, I got 335, which made me admire my uncle all the more.

As soon as he had finished his lunch, my uncle rose and wabbled out of the kitchen in his stockinged feet. Soon I heard him stirring in the study at the back of the apartment. I couldn't resist the temptation to follow him there. I found him, as I had hoped, poring over his stamp collection.

"Have you ever seen this one, boy?"

I glided to his side and looked at the stamp in question over his shoulder. It was triangular!

"Guatemala," my uncle said impressively, turning his round face to me. Behind his glasses, his eyes loomed tremendous and wet. There were short hairs growing on the tip of his nose. Directly beneath it, his dead cigar protruded like a pacifier from his mouth.

"Have you been to Guatemala, Uncle Aurelius?"

"Been there?" he cried. "Been there, did you say, boy? I'll have you know I spent two years of my life in Guatemala, looking for this stamp. It's the only one of its kind in the whole world."

"It must be worth a lot of money." My uncle nodded. "About how much, Uncle Aurelius?"

"Oh, about ten thousand dollars. Roughly."

"Wow . . ." I said.

My Aunt Agatha appeared in the doorway. "Time for you two to get going."

"There's no hurry, Agatha," my uncle said.

"It's almost one. The boy has to be in school in ten minutes. And it wouldn't do any one of us any harm if you were to get back to work."

"I just have to paste this stamp in the album, Agatha."

"Aurelius. . . ."

She followed us back to the kitchen. She had already washed our boots. Uncle Aurelius seated himself heavily on a chair and tried to light his soaked cigar, while my aunt, on her knees, put on his shoes and boots for him.

I picked up my own boots, said goodbye, and went downstairs. On my way out, I made sure the door was closed and locked behind me.

Saturdays, I had no school, so my uncle took me with him on his deliveries. I washed and dressed and went to the kitchen to wait for him. He made his appearance shortly, barefoot, his face loose and baggy from sleep. He was in his long woolen underwear which he always wore, never taking it off except Saturday afternoon, when he took his bath. He paused at the door, straining to read the kitchen clock from a distance without his glasses.

"What time is it, boy?" he said.

"Ten o'clock."

"Good gosh." He went to the bathroom and returned with his shaving gear and a cigar stub, carefully preserved overnight, in his mouth. He had put his trousers on over his underwear without hitching the suspenders, which now hung loose from his waist, like a harness. He shaved before the shaving mir-

ror, skillfully shifting the cigar stub out of the way of his straight razor. When he had finished, he combed his hair and eyebrows.

"Are you still here?" my Aunt Agatha said, glancing at the clock.

"Don't bother me," my uncle said.

He planted a foot on a chair and waited. My aunt, taking the hint, bent over and tied his shoelaces. Then my uncle changed feet, and she tied the other.

"I'll make breakfast," she said.

"Fine time to think of it," my uncle said crossly. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Do you?" my aunt retorted.

"Come along, boy," my uncle said.

We left without breakfast, but that didn't bother me. My uncle was a bakery jobber. He would soon load his truck with pies, pastries, and cakes, and I would have all I could eat.

My uncle's truck was very old. The windshield was cracked and looked like the map of some exotic continent. The side windows had long since ceased to work. The two side panels of the truck advertised my uncle's business: AUNT AGATHA'S CAKES.

I helped my uncle load the truck at the Elite Bakery, from which he bought his supplies, and we were off on our rounds.

"Hungry, boy?"

That was my cue. I knelt on my seat and faced the back of the truck. The trays of goodies were ranged neatly on racks. "What will you have, Uncle Aurelius?"

"Gimme a jellyroll."

I did, and had one myself. Then we had some cheese Danish. Then buns. My uncle sure had picked the right business.

Our first stop was John's Lunch.

"Hey, John," the counterman called as we entered. "Aunt Agatha's here."

If my uncle heard the man call him Aunt Agatha, he gave no sign. John appeared at the kitchen door, mopping his shiny forehead with his apron. "You gotta stromberries pie today?" he said.

"Sure, John."

"Gimme haff dozen."

"Any pastry? Jellyrolls?"

"Not today. Got plenny."

My uncle went to get the pies. John was about to go back to his kitchen when he spotted me. "Allo, yonk falla. You work for your uncle steady now?"

I shook my head. "Only Saturday."

"Thatsa good boy. Juice for that, I give you ice-crim-cone, eh?"

Just then my uncle came back with the pies. "No, John. No ice cream. Spoil his appetite."

"Spoil his appetite? Nosserree!" He pinched my cheek. "Ice-crim never spoil little boy's appetite. What you say, yonk fella? Come on, you have ice-crim-cone, too," he said to my uncle.

"No, no, John," my uncle replied, too strongly, I thought.

"Aleko, give ice-crim-cone to little falla. Make 'em two: one for Aunt Agatha, too."

We got home shortly after one.

"You must be starved," my aunt said.

"Don't bother me," my uncle said, still angry because my aunt had not made breakfast this morning. "Just set the table and don't bother me. Please."

After he had paid Aunt Agatha her commission on the day's sales for the use of her name in business, we sat down to a hearty lunch.

Later that afternoon, my aunt said, "Time for your bath, boy."

"O.K."

Up until recently, my Aunt Agatha used to bathe me, but I had reached that age, she said, when I had to take my own bath. In the case of my Uncle Aurelius, she made no such stipulation.

"Come, Aurelius," she called to him after I had vacated the bathroom. "I'll give you your bath now."

"I can take my own bath," he called back from the study.

"Suit yourself," my aunt said indifferently.

I dressed and went to the kitchen and asked my aunt to comb my hair. I could hear my uncle splashing away in the tub.

"Hurry, boy," Aunt Agatha said. "I have to give your uncle his bath pretty soon."

"But my uncle is taking his bath by himself this week."

A small smile cracked my aunt's sober lips.

Then my uncle's voice boomed from the bathroom. "Agatha. . . ." A few seconds later, as if he had been kept waiting for hours: "Agatha!"

"Coming, Aurelius," my aunt said. At the bathroom door, she paused. "Open up."

"Door's open," I heard my uncle say.

The Saint Lawrence Poker Circle met at eight o'clock that evening in our kitchen for a game of five-card stud with seven members playing. Aside from my aunt and uncle, there were Mr. Schwartz, the coffee merchant from downstairs, and his wife, Mrs. Schwartz; Miss Claire Jones, a spinster friend of my aunt's who, I think, was a little sweet on my uncle; and Officer Arsenault, who was a policeman, and Madame Arsenault. I was allowed to watch the Saturday night games until ten o'clock, when I had to go to bed. And even though I knew much less about poker then than I do now, I never left without a couple of dollars in nickels and dimes — gifts from the luckier players — in my pocket, which is better than I sometimes do now. Needless to say, I had to turn over my spoils to my aunt, who saved them until she had enough to buy me clothing as I needed it.

"Aurelius," my aunt said as Madame Arsenault gathered a sizable pot she had just won from her. "Why did you go in and draw my six? I would've made three sixes if it hadn't been for you."

Madame Arsenault threw me a dime.

"Don't bother me," my uncle said. "I played my hand."

"What hand?" my aunt said angrily. "You had no business at all in that pot."

"I was better than you, anyway," my uncle said, folding his cards without showing his hole one. "I had sevens back-to-back, if you must know."

"Let's see them," my aunt said, reaching for his hand. "Let's see your sevens."

"Don't bother me. Please." My uncle shuffled his cards into the desk, fast. "I had sevens back-to-back."

"You fool!" my aunt cried. "That's money you throw in the pot, not peanuts."

"If he wants to throw his money away, that's his business, Agatha," Miss Jones said, smiling sweetly at my uncle.

"Thanks, Claire," my uncle said, pouting. "You're the only friend I have around here."

The truth was that my Uncle Aurelius was a poor poker player. Though my Aunt Agatha rarely paid for more than three cards (and then everyone knew she had a sure thing), my uncle was in every pot to the bitter end. He was not one to be intimidated by open kings when he had an ace in the hole.

Officer Arsenault dealt the next hand. My uncle drew an ace showing. He bet a nickel. The bet went around the table to Mrs. Schwartz.

"Make it a qvarra," she said.

"And a quarter better," my uncle said, resenting an over-raise on principle. He put in a quarter and a nickel and took a quarter change.

Mrs. Schwartz caught it right away. She said, "I think you make mistake. You put a qvarra end a nickel end you take a qvarra change. Another qvarra you should put."

"No, Mrs. Schwartz," my uncle said, looking at her wide-eyed over his glasses. "I put in two quarters and took my original nickel back. See — here it is!" he said, picking a nickel at random from his change.

"No, no, mister," Mrs. Schwartz insisted. "You make mistake. You —"

"Sheila, mind your own business," Mr. Schwartz said. "The man told you he put in two qvarras and took his ariginel nickel back."

"Aright, aright, aready," Mrs. Schwartz said, backing down, unconvinced. "F'a qvarra I should vorry mine head?"

My uncle played his hand confidently for aces backed up, so, when he made his last bet, everyone folded. Except Mrs. Schwartz.

"Aces you got?"

"Maybe," my uncle said, poker-faced, shifting his cigar stub nervously.

"Vell, I tell you. I giff you a qvarra to keep you honest."

"What have you got?" my uncle said.

"Two little fours," Mrs. Schwartz said, showing them.

"They're good," my uncle said, shuffling his hand into the deck, fast.

"I closed tens!" Mrs. Arsenault gasped.

"And me queens!" my aunt said in a hoarse whisper.

There was an uproar. Everyone jumped on my uncle, even Claire Jones. There was a near brawl. Calm and unperturbed, Mrs. Schwartz took in the pot with fond fingers, tossing a nickel my way. I thought the rest would tear Uncle Aurelius to pieces.

Someone next door knocked angrily on the wall.

"Quiet! Quiet!" Miss Jones called above the noise. "Do you want them to call the police?"

Miss Jones was not unduly apprehensive. Occasionally, a disgruntled neighbor did summon the police. In fact, that was how Officer Arsenault had first joined the Saint Lawrence Poker Circle.

My Uncle Aurelius, hurt and humiliated, got up and gathered his money. "All right," he said, and I thought he might cry. "Since you people don't like the way I play . . . ."

The rest were taken aback. There was a moment of embarrassed silence.

"It's not that we mind how you play," Madame Arsenault started.

"Please don't go," said Miss Jones.

"*Vraiment*, Aurelius," Officer Arsenault said, accenting the last syllable of my uncle's name.

"Aurelius, sit down and deal the cards," my aunt ordered.

My uncle was persuaded to stay. In fact, he stayed and stayed. He stayed so long that he got up too late the next morning to go to church.

I went home from school the Monday following with a good report card in my pocket and the joy and pride that go with it in my boy's heart. My high spirits were additionally elated when I saw from afar that our door was properly closed. My uncle had not yet come home. I could dash upstairs and show my aunt my report card without pausing to take my boots off. I scrambled up the stairs as fast as I could go, let myself in and dashed up the indoor flight two at a time. My joy was in my throat by then, and I had to call out to my Aunt Agatha by name.

At the top of the stairs, in his stockinged feet, waiting for me with arms folded across his chest, stood my uncle. I almost ran him down. His eyes automatically dropped to my boots. They were splattered with snow and mud.

"Did you remember to take your boots off before coming upstairs, boy?" he said sternly.

I turned to go back downstairs.

"Not so fast!" he bellowed.

"Yes, sir."

"What do I tell you every day about the front door?"

"To make sure it's closed tight and locked all the time," I replied swiftly, relieved because he appeared to drop the matter of my boots.

"Do you happen to know that someone left that door unlocked today?" my uncle went on. "And do you happen to know that some lowly thief entered the house this very afternoon, while we were all out, and stole my priceless stamp collection — among many other things?"

I gasped. I paled. All I could think of was the ten thousand dollar triangular Guatemala stamp.

"When you left for school after lunch, did you remember to close and lock the front door?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Are you quite sure of that, boy?"

"I'm sure — I'm sure. I always lock the door. I swear!"

"Don't swear, boy, or you may be sorry. Is it locked now?"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Without another word, he took me by the arm and propelled me down the stairs. He tried the door. It yielded readily to his pull. In my excitement over the report card, I had failed to lock it.

"Upstairs," my uncle commanded.

What hurt me more than the spanking he gave me was the knowledge that I was innocent. There could be no doubt but that my uncle, who had left the house after me, had left the door unlocked. He always did.

After my uncle had put his strap away, my aunt said, "Boy, go fetch me a pound of butter from the store," which was strange, because she had sent me out for butter only the day before.

When I got back with the butter, I saw my chance to get into my aunt's and uncle's good grace once again. My good report card was still in my pocket. That would appease my aunt. And if I were to shovel the snow off the outdoor stairs, I would appease my uncle when he got home.

For he had already left the house.

The passing of those years in Montreal was painfully slow for me, for it bridged the long span between boyhood and adolescence. By contrast, it must have been swift for my aunt and uncle, for it brought them to the end of their allotted time. He passed away in my senior year of high school. She followed him shortly thereafter. Sadly, I had no one to take pride in my matriculation.

Once again, I was left alone in the world and, again, sole heir to modest worldly possessions. Surprisingly, these turned out to be of substance in the end, for they included the accumulated yield of my father's rather immodest double indemnity insurance policy, preserved quite intact, by my Uncle Aurelius and Aunt Agatha in a trust account for my future education with the Royal Bank of Canada.

5.

OLD MAN WITH FISHERMAN'S CAP

The old man had been walking for hours. He walked with a sprightly gait, head high, eyes fixed on a distant destination which, in reality he did not have. He was, in fact, lost. He did not know that he was in the Queensboro section of New York, heading towards the city. He was dressed lightly, wearing only a pair of black slacks and a blue short-sleeved shirt. He cut a slim, rather youthful, figure that contrasted with his deeply lined face, white hair and, oddly, a jet black mustache. In the morning, when he started out, it had been cool and comfortable, but now the sun beat down on him oppressively. He stopped, removed the fisherman's cap from his head and mopped his brow.

A man approached him and asked directions.

"No speak Ingliss," the old man said to him. To himself he said with a snicker, "Me you ask, imbecile?"

He walked on, past used car lots, factories and gas stations. Soon he was in the grim expanse of Queens Plaza. Then he saw the bridge.

The bridge posed a problem. Where would it take him? He was not at all sure he wanted to take it. But then, being a man of the sea, he was seized by a desire to see water and boats again.

When he reached the approach ramp, the skyline of Manhattan burst on him. He caught his breath. The sun was setting behind the outline of the city, lending it a blazing halo. The tall buildings formed a wall of concrete and glass against it.

Crossing the bridge was a disappointment. The river was dark and oily brown. Here and there, small boats stirred its murk with dirty swirls. A freighter cut a foamy swath, like a spine down its back. The old man thought of the Aegean, its water so clear you could drink it, and spat disdainfully into the East River.

He crossed First Avenue and walked west on Sixtieth Street, noting how the neighborhoods improved on the way. At Park Avenue, he caught a whiff of wealth. "At last: America!" he said to himself. Then he was at Fifth Avenue and Central Park. The park came as a surprise: open, fresh, cool and green. He sat on a bench to rest. He had walked many kilometers that day. How many? He could not be sure. Maybe fifteen, maybe twenty. But walking fifteen or twenty kilometers in one day could not faze a Greek. Had not the Greeks invented the marathon?

When night fell, he thought he should move on, but lacked the strength to rise to his feet. He lowered his body onto the bench in stages and fell asleep.

"Where can he be?" Zoe Makrides said.

Her husband turned away from the window. "He can't have gone far," he said. "He has no money. He doesn't speak the language. And he's seventy-nine."

"Maybe we should call the police, George."

"No, not yet, it's only half past seven."

He called the police at ten. A squad car came to the house. One of the policemen took down the vital facts of Christos Makrides.

"Does he have lapses of memory?" he said.

"No," George said. "My father's memory is as good as mine."

"Does he have friends here in Douglaston — or anywhere on the Island?"

"No, he's only been in the country three months."

"Can you think of any reason why he would want to run away?"

"No, not really."

"Well . . ." Zoe started.

"Yes?" the policeman said.

"He didn't like it here," Zoe said.

"That could do it." The policeman put his pad away. "We'll put out an APB on him, Mr. Makrides. That fisherman's cap should tag him pretty good. We'll call you the minute we have something."

The old man awoke at dawn, amazed to find himself on a park bench. He was stiff; his bones ached. He winced, cursing an imaginative Greek curse under his breath, and straightened himself out. Once on his feet, he stretched, feeling every muscle in his body. He wondered why he had come to this park. Surely, this was not where he wanted to go. He wanted to go home. He retraced his course of the previous day, winding up at the bridge again. He stood on the corner, overwhelmed by the speed and volume of traffic on First Avenue.

He stopped a woman walking by. "Kennedy?" he said.

"Kennedy?" The old man made a motion of flying with his arms. The woman laughed. "You mean Kennedy Airport," she said. "It's on Long Island, on the other side of the river." She pointed beyond the bridge. Then it occurred to her that he was on foot. "You're not planning to walk to Kennedy, are you?"

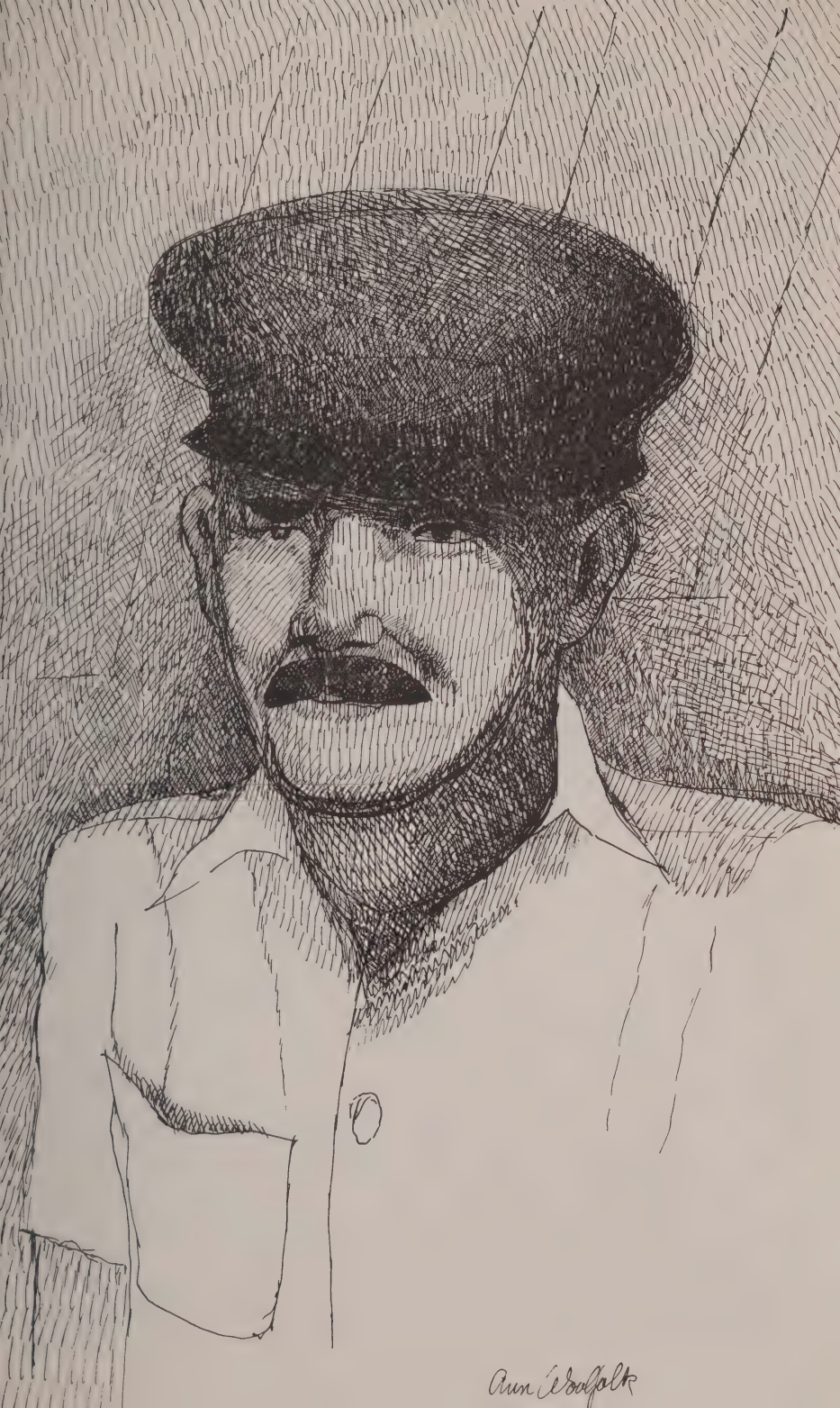
"No spik Ingliss," the old man said. "Thank you, thank you." He touched the visor of his cap.

Of course. He was in the heart of the city. The airport would not be in the city. He had been stupid. He had allowed himself to be allured by the skyline and the river. He crossed First Avenue angrily, defying the traffic. Cars honked their horns and stopped short. A black policewoman blew her whistle fiercely at him.

"May I boil you!" the old man called to her in Greek.

Then he started his trek back across the bridge.

Night had settled on Douglaston again.



George hung up the phone. "Nothing," he said grimly.

"The poor old man . . ." Zoe said.

"I think you were right, Zoe. He ran away because he didn't like it in this country."

"He was lonely, George. He had no one to talk to — I don't speak the language. I was with him all day and couldn't even ask him what he wanted for dinner."

George shook his head. "You took care of him like your own father, Zoe."

"Maybe we should have left him in Tinos."

"Alone? At his age?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . ."

"Besides, he wanted to come. He was very happy I asked him."

When the small charter plane landed on the Tinos airstrip, George spotted his father by the side of the dirt runway. He was dressed in black: black suit, black tie, black armband, and, always, the black fisherman's cap. He had not seen his father in some years, not since he and Zoe had spent the steaming, searing month of August there. His father had aged beyond imagining.

The old man embraced him tearfully and said, "We have lost the mother."

He kissed his father's hand in the traditional gesture of respect.

His father dried his eyes with a black-bordered handkerchief. "We have lost the mother, little George," he said again.

On the way into town, he remembered how the island had depressed him that summer. He felt the depression creeping over him again now.

Not that Tinos lacked color. In fact, it was made to order for tourists. Whitewashed houses, like cubes, rose in tiers from the harbor to the top of a hill dominated by the shrine of the *Panaghia*. The waterfront circled the entire harbor, lined with outdoor cafes, their square wooden tables and straight-backed chairs arranged, as on a checkerboard, to the very edge of the wharf. The small harbor was lined with caiques, swaying lightly on the blue-green water, their shadows reflected on the clear, pebbly bottom.

If the tourists had not invaded Tinos, that was because the Greek Orthodox faithful had rendered it a religious bastion. They came endlessly, especially on August 15th, the feast day of the *Panaghia*, to seek her miraculous cure for their incurable ailments. They came in droves — the lame, the halt, the blind, the sick — to be cured by the Mother of God, leaving behind their offerings of silver and gold replicas of legs, eyes, hands, crutches — in grateful acknowledgement of the cures She had performed on them.

The hale and hearty, George thought, were not much better off in Tinos. Life on the island was threadbare, poor, constricting. It lacked even the basics of human comfort. He had been outraged by the water pumps, the outhouses, the abject surrender to the brutal heat. His father's house consisted of two rooms and an outdoor latrine. It stood on a street through which a car could not pass. Only mules and donkeys could, and did, leaving their fresh droppings

behind on the cobbles. The bareness of life, the miserable procession of the pilgrims, the insular containment of the spirit — these things had depressed him that summer.

His mother's funeral, for which he had now come, was a charade. The plain pine box carried aloft like a crate through the alleys to the church. . . the interminable Orthodox ceremony. . . the wailing of the professional mourners. . . the pretentious, above-ground cemetery where his mother was laid to rest. Then the tribal reception in the small house. . . the serving of the traditional fish and wine. . . the aromas of food and people that seemed to bother him alone. . . . Not until late in the afternoon, the end of the carnival. . . .

He and his father went down to the harbor and sat at a table by the sea. Over bitter Greek coffee, he said, "What will you do now, Father?"

His father shrugged indifferently. "What can I do? I have my little house, my little boat. The time will pass until I go to find the mother."

He said, as he had planned, "Father, come with me."

"With you? To America?" George nodded. "America . . . ." The old man savored the dream.

"We have much room in the house. The boys have their own life now, Markos in Chicago, Alekos in Denver."

"And Zoe? What does Zoe say?"

"Zoe wants you, too."

A smile added a wrinkle to the old man's face. "Well, I am coming." He ordered a bottle of *retsina*. They clinked glasses. "To America!" he cried.

They put the house up for sale and left. On the Olympic 747, despite his ample apprehension, the old man was a boy with joy.

"America. . ." he said again and again. "My head does not fit it." His heart fluttered like a chicken caught in his chest.

By nightfall, the old man was directly under the final approach pattern to Kennedy Airport. One giant jetliner after another roared over his head as it came in for a landing, lights flashing wildly. He was almost there. But he was weary. He could not take another step. He found a secluded spot off the highway, lay down on the grass and fell asleep.

He rose refreshed the next morning and resumed his walk. By noon he had reached the terminal area of the airport. He strolled along the length of the International Arrivals Building, looking for the familiar five-ring logo of Olympic Airways.

He stopped a passerby. "*Olympiaki,*" he said. The man smiled and shrugged. "Imbecile!" the old man said.

Further on he approached a skycap. "*Olympiaki,*" he said. "*Olympiaki.*"

The skycap formed the word on his lips. "Olyp— Olympic!" He pointed the way to the American Airlines terminal which the Greek carrier used.

"In America," the old man decided, "the blacks have more brains than the whites."

He located the Olympic counter. "Do you speak Greek?" he said to the agent.

"Certainly, mister."

"Glory to God!" The old man spread his arms and cast his eyes upward in gratitude. "Listen, my son. I want to go to the homeland."

"Do you have a ticket, Mister?"

"No, but I have money."

"Certainly." The agent pulled out a tariff. "Going only, or with return?"

"Going — going!" the old man said crossly. "What do I want with the return?"

The Olympic agent quoted him the fare of several hundred dollars to Athens.

"Well. Agreed. Only I do not have the money here. It is in Greece."

The agent laughed. "And how will you get the money from Greece, old man? Will you go to get it by swimming? Then you do not need the airplane!"

"I will pay you when I arrive in Tinos — you have my word of honor," the old man said solemnly.

The ticket agent laughed again. He said. "You cannot buy a ticket with your word of honor. Do you not have relatives here?" He gave him a closer look. His eyes settled on his fisherman's cap. "Was not your photograph in the Greek newspaper this morning?"

"Whom do you take me for? An actor of Hollywood?"

He drifted away. A minute later he was stopped by an airport guard. "Mr. Christos Makrides?"

The Olympic ticket agent — of course! "That horned-one!" the old man said.

The old man was at the window, looking out. He had been there all afternoon. He had not said a word since they had brought him home from the airport. He stood in a stubborn, determined silence.

"How do you think you could fly to Greece without money?" George reproached him. "I cannot understand that. You are not stupid."

Silence.

"How could you leave us without a word? Did you not know that we would worry?"

Silence.

"You made us call the police."

In the end, George relented. His anger, spent on questions he realized would never be answered, gave way to compassion for the sad, crushed figure at the window.

"Did you see your photograph in the Greek newspaper?" he said at length.

"My photograph? No." George handed him the paper. The old man beamed. "I am important!" he cried. He read the story. "This is how you caught me. . . ." He faced his son squarely. He said, "What happens now?"

"Whatever you want, Father."

The old man's eyes, brimming with tears, flashed defiantly. "I want to go back to my little corner," he pleaded.

"What will you do like the cuckoo in Tinos?" George said sharply.

"Here you have us, your children to care for you. . . . We love you, Father. . . ."

"I know that, little George," the old man said. "I know that you want me to stay. But — I am a stranger here. This is not my homeland. Understand?"

George shook his head. "No, I do not understand. Here, you have everything. You have your own room, your own bathroom, you have the color television, the telephone, the air conditioner. What do you have in Tinos?"

The old man was amazed. "What you ask me: what do I have in Tinos?" he cried, aghast. "In Tinos, if you want to know, I have my little house, I have my little boat for the fishing, I have my old friends. . . . What do I want with the air conditioners and the televisions and the telephones — and the toilets?" Then, as an afterthought, he added, "And I have the *Panaghia* to care for me in Tinos."

Zoe was at the door. "He wants to go home, doesn't he?" George didn't answer. "Then let him go George. The house hasn't been sold. Send him back."

"Zoe, he's an old man. . . . He's all alone. . . ."

"What did she say in English?" the old man said, sensing a breach.

George hesitated. "She said, if you want to go, we should let you."

"And what do you say? What do you say, my little George?"

Slowly, reluctantly, George nodded. "If you want it. . . ."

The tears rolled down the old man's face. "I thank you, my son. I thank you much," he said.

Before George could stop him, his father took his right hand and brought it to his lips.

At the airport, the old man was buoyant. He embraced them both.

"This land cannot contain me," he said, explaining the problem to his entire satisfaction.

"*Adio*, Father," Zoe said.

"You are not afraid alone on the airplane, are you, Father?" George said.

"Do not worry. These old bones do not know fear."

"Then go to the good, Father."

The old man turned and walked away from them, walked away, too, from the telephones, the televisions and the toilets, and hurried toward the plane that would take him back to Tinos, to his little corner, to his little house by the blue-green sea.

Beyond the baggage checkpoint, he could be seen to break into a trot.

My *Panaghia*," he could be heard saying shakily, "I am coming! I am coming with the airplane. Please put your hand on the airplane, my little *Panaghia*. . . ."

6.

THE MIRACLE

I knew Father Eleftherios when he was Mr. Eleftherios — Mr. Eleftherios Pappas, the dry cleaner. Even I used to call him Mr. Eleftherios rather than Mr. Pappas, in accordance with the Greek custom of expressing a friendly respect for one's elders. Similarly, I called his wife Mrs. Elenitsa. Their children I called by their given names, since we were friends: Alex, Mike, Mary, Cleo, and Dina. After the miracle, of course, Mr. Eleftherios was Father Eleftherios to me as to everyone else.

He was a tall, thin, almost skeletal man with graying hair. In my ten-year-old eyes, he was an old man. Looking back from my present vantage-point, I see he must have been in his middle forties at the time. He had bright brown eyes that sparkled behind a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. He sported a manly mustache and always seemed to need a shave.

We were next-door neighbors on Eighth Avenue in the Astoria, Queens section of New York. Our particular block was largely populated by Greek immigrants, like our parents, who had come to America after World War I to seek their fortunes in the promised land. Astoria Dry Cleaners, where Mr. Eleftherios toiled long and hard to earn his family's bread in those Depression years of the thirties, was located on Fourth Avenue. For the most part, it was a one-man operation. Mrs. Elenitsa would help her husband after she had taken care of the children. Alex and Mike would do their share at the shop after school. Weekends and holidays, even Mary, Cleo, Dina, and I, who were younger, would report for work too. Our job was to go through the pockets of clothing for valuables and coins — and allowed by Mr. Eleftherios to keep any small change his careless customers may have overlooked.

But, for the most part, it was a one-man operation. So it was that Mr. Eleftherios was alone in his shop when the fire broke out. It seems he had lit a cigarette while cleaning some clothes, and the flame of his match somehow ignited the fumes of the cleaning fluid. The small shop became an instant inferno. Mr. Eleftherios promptly ran out. On the sidewalk, dazed and scared, he watched the flames devour his place of business. Then he remembered he had a considerable amount of money in his register — almost twenty dollars, he recalled later. He rushed back into his burning shop to retrieve the money, but the blaze was too far gone. He stood, transfixed, just inside the door. There he collapsed, partly inside, partly outside the store.

That was how the police and firemen found him. They pulled him to safety, unscathed by the fire but in a deep state of shock. They rushed him to

Astoria General Hospital, but it was too late. Mr. Eleftherios Pappas, the dry cleaner, had suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed on his right side.

After that, Mr. Eleftherios was a broken man. He was, of course, broken in a physical sense. He could not talk clearly — he babbled. He could not feed himself without dribbling food on the table and his person. His shrivelled right leg dangled like a dead limb. He carried it in a harness which he wore like leather suspenders and dragged himself on crutches. His hair and mustache seemed to turn white overnight, and the light went out of his bright eyes. His doctors decreed unequivocally that he would be a cripple for the rest of his life.

Worse, Mr. Eleftherios was a spiritually broken man. He withdrew into himself as into a protective shell. He became morose and ornery. He would sit by a rear window of the living-room, reading Greek newspapers and magazines. Mr. Eleftherios was not an educated man, but he could read haltingly and write in a child's hand and grammar. Even though he had lost his business, he was too proud to go on relief. So Mrs. Elenitsa was reduced to taking in laundry. Alex and Mike quit school and got menial jobs. The girls helped their mother in their spare time. The Pappas family barely managed to hang on.

Much as I used to love to go to their house, I came to loathe it after Mr. Eleftherios came home from the hospital. I could not bear to see him in his lonely corner, constantly reading his Greek newspapers. He had become grotesque. The mere sight of him filled me with disgust. My mother kept reminding me that it was a sin to feel that way, but I couldn't help it, I really couldn't.

The Pappases had a parrot called Papagalos, which flew about the house freely, perching on everyone's shoulders and croaking his greeting to visitors in passable Greek: "Kalimera! Kalimera!" or "Papagalos! Papagalos!" exulting in the sound of his own name. Now Papagalos brooded in his cage, a silent and crippled bird by the side of his silent and crippled master.

Mr. Eleftherios had been crippled for five or six years when, one Saturday night, he had a dream in which a lady in black appeared before him. In her outstretched arms she offered him the robes of a Greek Orthodox priest and urged him to go to church and to follow in the footsteps of his uncle. Mr. Eleftherios awoke and told his wife, haltingly, about his dream. Mrs. Elenitsa at once recognized the lady in black as the *Panaghia* — the Holy Mother of God, urging him to follow the calling of his late uncle, who had been a priest in Greece.

Now, Mr. Eleftherios had been a religious man all his life. He never missed a Sunday service at St. Stylianos Church, where, in fact, he performed as cantor. He observed all of the Greek Orthodox holidays, even though many of these were not observed in America. He would close shop on Greek Good Friday, whether or not it coincided with the "American" Good Friday and regardless of any inconvenience to his customers. He kept the fast strictly. He abstained from meat on Wednesday and Friday the year round and for forty days before Easter. He imposed the same abstinence on his family. Once, driv-

ing to Atlantic City to visit relatives over a long weekend, he stopped the car at a roadside stand for refreshments. The children wanted hot dogs, but it happened to be a Friday, and Mr. Eleftherios would not hear of it. Instead, he bought some frankfurter rolls and some bananas, split the rolls, peeled the bananas, placed the bananas in the rolls, and passed them off to the kids as hot dogs.

Since his accident, however, Mr. Eleftherios had lost faith in God as well as in himself. He never went to church any more. And so he ridiculed his wife's interpretation of his dream. When the same dream occurred to him the Saturday following, he was somewhat more amenable to her entreaties that he go to church. But, knowing he could never be a priest for lack of formal education, let alone his age, he did nothing about it. When the lady in black returned the third Saturday, she was positively furious at him for disobeying her command. Mr. Eleftherios awoke from his dream, trembling and bathed in perspiration. In the dead of night, it was a simple matter for Mrs. Elenitsa to persuade him to go to church the next morning.

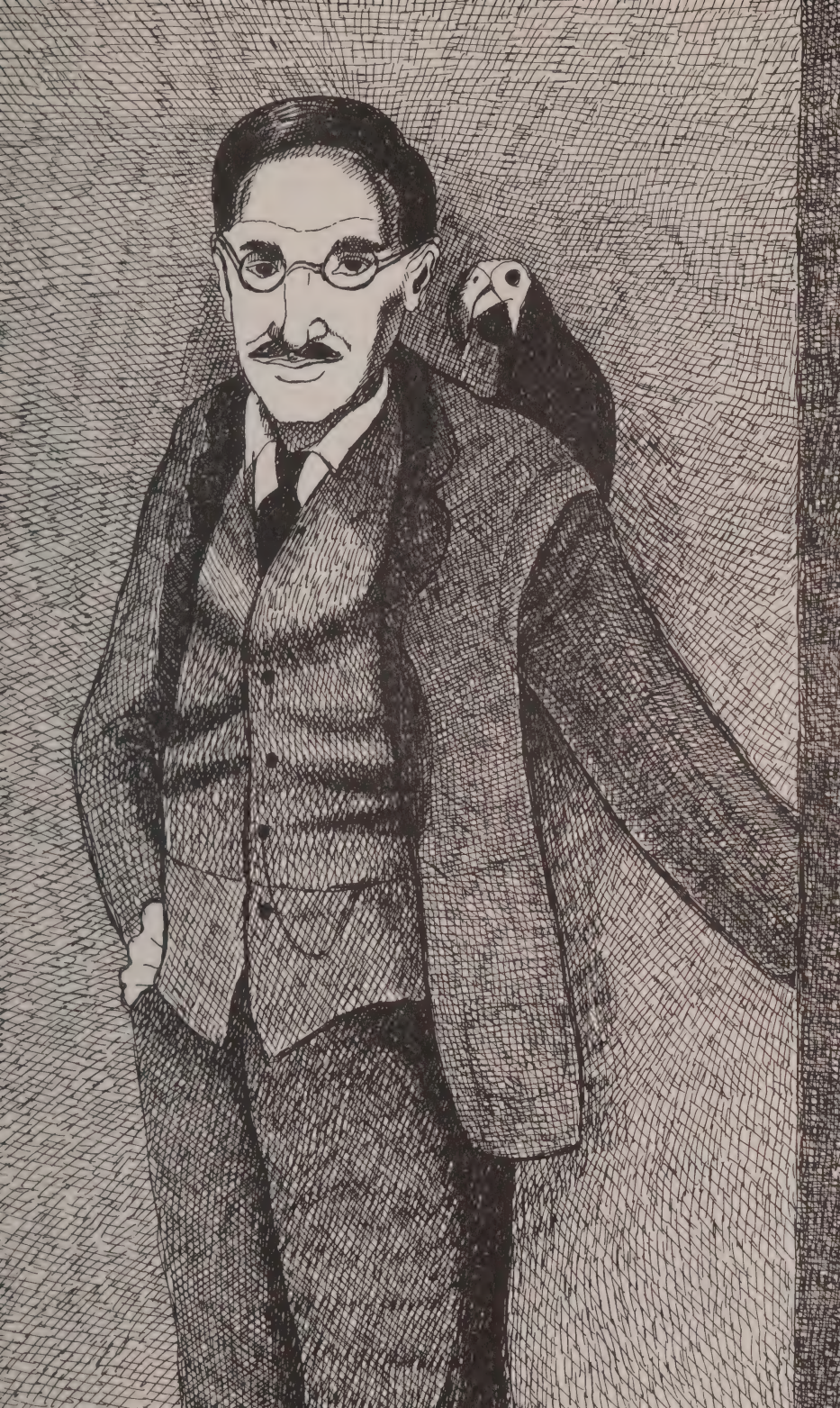
Mr. Eleftherios appeared to be in church in body only that Sunday. The Pappas family had occupied an entire bench, with the father a limp, listless figure in their midst. Through it all, through the chanting of the Byzantine hymns he knew so well, the rising, the kneeling, and the prayers of the faithful, Mr. Eleftherios slouched in his seat, clinging to his crutches as if he feared someone might steal them from him. Never once did he cross himself.

Then, at the most sacred moment of the liturgy, when the priest brings forth the chalices that contain the bread and wine to be transformed into the body and blood of Christ, Mr. Eleftherios let out a long, loud wail. It seemed to gush from hell and reach all the way to heaven above. A hush fell over the congregation, as if God had dropped a blanket on it. The priest, holding the chalices aloft, faced the assemblage with surprise. Then, incredibly, still screaming with pain, Mr. Eleftherios knocked over his crutches and sprang to a standing position on his good leg, holding on to the back of the bench in front of him for support.

"Scissors! Scissors! Bring scissors!" he cried in a clear voice. Somewhere, someone found a pair of scissors and ran to the side of Mr. Eleftherios. "Cut the straps," he cried. "Cut the straps! The pain is killing me!"

The straps that held up Mr. Eleftherios's right leg were cut, the harness released, and Mr. Eleftherios stood on his own two feet for a drawn moment, his arms stretched out in the form of a cross. Then he collapsed, consumed by excruciating pain. As he described it later, it was like a sword of fire that slashed through his body. When he came to, he stood up and made his own halting way to the astonished priest. He knelt and kissed the hem of the holy man's robe. The priest, still holding the chalices aloft, announced to the congregation: "My fellow Christians — we have just witnessed a miracle of God."

Alex and Mike helped their father back to his seat. The priest completed the liturgy and went into a special service to celebrate the miracle that had taken place in his church. There was great jubilation. The faith of everyone present was greatly strengthened.



Our family knew nothing about the miracle. For some reason, we had missed church that Sunday. Mrs. Elenitsa called that afternoon and asked us to go over as soon as possible. There was an urgency in her voice on the phone, so we wasted no time.

My father rang the bell. Presently the door was opened, slowly, deliberately — by Mr. Eleftherios himself. A broad grin lighted his face. His brown eyes sparkled once again behind his wire-rimmed glasses. Tears streamed down his cheeks. He completed the ceremony of opening the door and stood clear of it to welcome us. The parrot, Papagalos, perched on his shoulder, croaked its fool head off: "Kalimera! Kalimera!" As we rushed in, Mr. Eleftherios embraced us, each and everyone of us, beaming with joy.

In a corner of the entry hall, resting idly against the wall, stood his old standbys — the crutches he would never need again. The spectacular cure of Mr. Eleftherios defied both the science of medicine and the traditions of our church. His doctors offered elaborate and unconvincing explanations for his incredible recovery. The church explained it, quite simply, as a miracle. In spite of his lack of formal education and his advanced age, Mr. Eleftherios was tutored privately as a theological student and eventually, by special dispensation, ordained a priest.

And so it was that Mr. Eleftherios became Father Eleftherios.

7.

CHRISTINA

The church was stuffy that August Sunday of 1935. Incense hung in thin, aromatic threads in the still air. The Greek Orthodox hymns droned on and on. In my jacket and knickers, long-sleeved shirt and tie, I was suffocating. I played a game I often played in church, visualizing myself anywhere but in church — playing stickball in the streets of Washington Heights or marbles on the corner lot near our house or romping in the park or in a snowball fight — where I would rather be, depending on the season of the year. At the moment, I was frolicking in the cool waves at Coney Island.

Suddenly the priest fell silent, the chanting stopped. A wave of expectation rippled through the congregation. Down the center aisle came the church caretaker in his plain black cassock, holding a bundle wrapped in a flimsy blanket in his arms. He walked straight to the Holy Gate, knelt gingerly, and rested his burden at the feet of the ikon of Jesus Christ. As he moved away, the bundle began to wail.

"My beloved parishioners," the priest said. "Today we hope to witness an act of Christian charity. This innocent infant," he went on, pointing to the wailing bundle, "has been placed at the goodness of our congregation in the hope that one of you kind people will come forth and accept to be her godparent."

Absolute silence followed the priest's words. Standing by the Holy Gate, resplendent in his golden garments and crown, he glanced systematically about the church, his eyes pleading for a volunteer. No one came forth. The priest continued, "Truly, my friends, accepting this challenge from our Lord would be an extreme expression of Christian charity."

Still no one moved. Then my mother leaned over my head and whispered something to my father on my other side.

"No, no, Despina," he whispered back gruffly, shaking his head.

"But I want to, Niko."

"Are you crazed, woman? It is expensive."

"I have some money hidden in a corner," my mother insisted. "It is a kindness, Niko. I will do it."

She brushed past me, hesitated briefly in the aisle, then made her way resolutely to the front of the church.

The priest smiled broadly. He took my mother's hands in his. To the congregation, he said, "Beloved, we have a true Christian in our midst." He paused. "And now, let the parents of this little girl come forth."

From one of the last row of benches, a man and a woman materialized in the aisle. He was short and round, with a balding head and puffed, brown eyes. He was dressed, oddly, in a tuxedo. His wife was younger, thin, with a long face and high cheeks, and oddly, too, for a Greek, blond hair and blue eyes. The man marched forward in an absurd, lordotic fashion, holding his head proudly high. His wife followed him humbly in a manner that suggested habit rather than circumstance.

The priest introduced them to my mother. "And now, Mrs. Ioannides," he said, "take your goddaughter and return her to her parents."

My mother stooped and picked up her bundle. Immediately the infant stopped crying. A chuckle rippled through the church. Even my father smiled. My mother handed the infant to her parents.

The priest spoke to them in undertones. Then he raised his head and addressed his flock. "My beloved, Mrs. Nikos Ioannides has accepted the holy obligation of baptizing this child in the name of our Lord."

My mother came back. My father was a marble column. The parents of the baby carried her, wailing once again, to the rear of the church. The liturgy resumed. The hymns droned on once again. And I was back at Coney Island.

"Do not make so, Niko," my mother was saying at the table. "It is a sin from God."

"It is a sin from God that we have to spend all that money to baptize this little girl we never even saw before," my father said. He tried to sound outraged, as he did when he scolded me, but even I could tell his heart was not in it. "And what is their name, please?"

"Lekos. Pantelis and Margarita Lekos."

"Lekos?" my father said. "Lekos . . . they must be islanders. Only do not ask me for money," he concluded.

"I will not ask you for a nickel," my mother said haughtily. "Do not worry. I will pay for everything."

My father went back to his chicken soup.

"Ma," I said.

"*Mama*," my mother corrected me in Greek.

"Ma, why did those people put that little girl on the floor in church?" I persisted in English. "And why do you have to be the *nouna*?"

"They do not speak when they eat," my mother said.

My sister volunteered the explanation. "It's because they have no money, stupid. They're poor."

"But what does Ma have to do with it? We don't even know them."

"Because it's an act of Christian charity. Didn't you hear the priest in church this morning?"

"Silence!" my mother cried. "If I hear one more word of this English, we will not go to the Coney Island." To me, she said, "That little girl will be your sister."

"But I already have a sister."

My mother paused, then said, "This one will be your sister from God."

When my father finished his chicken, he said, indifferently, "What name will you give her?"

"Christina," my mother said.

"Christina? Why Christina?"

"Because I found her at the feet of the Christ." My mother turned to us. "And I do not want you to tell anyone what the name will be, hear? The parents must learn it at the baptism." Then, for emphasis, she said in English, "Don't tell nobody — nobody."

My sister and I nodded. After lunch, we went to Coney Island.

In September, my mother invited the Lekos family to dinner. They refused on the grounds that Mr. Lekos worked as a waiter every single night of the week. At her insistence, they agreed to come on a Saturday afternoon before he went to work. He came in his tuxedo; she in a little blue dress that matched her eyes. The baby was wrapped in its blanket.

"A small present for you, *koumbara*," Margarita Lekos said, addressing my mother in their new relationship. "Very small." She handed her a flat, square box, neatly wrapped and tied with a ribbon.

My mother opened it. It was an embroidered handkerchief. "Ah, how beautiful! Thank you, *koumbara.*"

"I embroidered it for you," Mrs. Lekos said.

"Yes, yes, with her hands," her husband put in, as if to enhance the value of the gift.

"Beautiful," my father agreed.

The baby started to cry.

"Come, my golden one," my mother said, picking her up. "Come to your *nouna.*"

The baby stopped crying. My mother beamed. Since my father was not paying for the christening, he beamed, too.

After the ceremonial serving of sweets and whiskey to her guests, my mother brought out the baptismal clothes she had bought. She opened up six or seven boxes of pink clothing: dresses, caps, shoes, socks — a whole layette.

Tears sparkled in the blue eyes of Mrs. Lekos. "How pretty," she said, stroking the clothes. "I do not know how to thank you, Mrs. Ioannides."

"Yes, yes," Mr. Lekos said. For some reason, he seemed suddenly ill at ease, humiliated, as if my mother had insulted him with her generosity. He glanced at his watch. "Come, woman," he said. "I must go to work."

After they left, my father said, "Where did you find all that money, Despina?"

"From my pay," my mother said, putting the baptismal things away.

"The furs must pay well."

"Only for good causes." My mother confronted my father, fully expecting to find disapproval in his eyes. Instead, she found a smile on his lips.

Later, my sister said to me, "We better get a seat near the aisle at the christening."

"Why?"

"So we can run and tell the baby's parents the name and get a tip, stupid."

My sister was right. The custom was for the baby's parents to stand at the entrance of the church during the baptism, without actually witnessing it. When the godparent gave the name, there would be a frantic rush of youngsters like ourselves to tell them the name and receive a few coins in return. I remembered getting dimes and quarters and even half dollars at baptisms that way.

"I'll be first," I said.

"Oh, no, you won't," my sister, who was older, assured me.

The christening took place on a wet and dreary Sunday in October. The church was dank. The handful of people present kept their coats on. The small baptismal party gathered about the font. The priest read the ritual. My mother, in a cerise satin gown she had bought for the occasion, stood by, ready to perform her duty. A friend of hers held the baby, fast asleep in her arms. From my seat, I spotted Mr. and Mrs. Lekos, him in his tuxedo, her in her little blue dress, in the rear, and planned my run to them.

The priest folded his hymnal and asked for the preparation of the baby. My mother's friend took her to a side bench, undressed her quickly and wrapped her in her blanket. When she returned to the font, the baby was awake, quiet and smiling for once, playing with her toes. My mother performed the ritual of applying holy oil with a piece of cotton on her tiny body in the sign of small crosses. The baby giggled.

The priest asked for the infant's name.

"Christina," my mother said.

The priest pulled back the broad sleeves of his tunic and tested the temperature of the water with his right elbow. Finding it warm enough, he took the baby carefully under the arms. Then, chanting, he immersed her, screaming and kicking now, three times into the font. Finally he handed her to my mother, who stood waiting with a white sheet over her bodice and arms. This time, even she could not quiet the baby. Dried and wrapped in the sheet, Christina was a bundle of wrinkles and tears.

I made a dash for the rear of the church — hard on the heels of my sister. Standing at the door, Pantelis Lekos seemed somehow appropriately dressed in his tuxedo then. His wife stood at his side.

"Christina! Christina!" we screamed. "Christina!"

Mr. Lekos was taken aback. "Christina?" he said, frowning at the unusual name.

"What a beautiful name!" his wife said.

"Yes, yes," he agreed absently. Then he noticed our outstretched arms. "Thank you for bringing me the name, children."

And he deposited a coin into each eager palm. I grabbed mine and turned away to protect my treasure. When I looked to see what Mr. Lekos had given me for bringing him the name, I was crestfallen. It was a penny.

After the christening, my mother arranged for a small celebration in the

basement hall of the church. There were drinks and cakes and good things to eat. Christina, the guest of honor, smothered in pink, slept through it all. When the party was over, my mother asked the Lekos family to Sunday dinner the following week.

Margarita Lekos glanced imploringly at her husband.

"No — no. Thank you." Pantelis Lekos said. "I cannot. I had to get special permission today. I thank you, but I sorrow much."

Several other attempts by my mother to get together with them failed as well.

"The oil did not catch, Despina," my father concluded.

"Do not talk like that, Niko!" my mother chided him. "It does not matter. Do the good and throw it in the deep."

My father persisted. "They do not want to be obligated. If we invite them, they have to invite us, and they do not have the money. Today, waiters work for tips alone."

"Pity," my mother said. "Margarita Lekos is a good woman."

"*He* is the one," my father said. "He is too proud to accept an invitation if he cannot return it."

"He's stingy," I put in, remembering the penny.

"He is not stingy," my sister said. "I told you: they're poor."

As Thanksgiving neared, my mother invited them again. Again they refused. Aware of her obligations as a godmother, she decided to send Christina a present for the holiday.

"Maybe it would be better to send them a turkey," my father said.

My mother hesitated. "Is that not like charity?"

My father shrugged. "A turkey is a turkey, especially these days. Besides, he added pointedly, "charity is a Christian virtue."

On Thanksgiving morning, my mother put the turkey and some cookies and some other holiday goodies she had baked into a gaily colored basket with a card that read, "For my goddaughter, Christina, on the Day of the Thanksgivings."

"Take it to Mrs. Lekos," she said to my sister. "And you go with your sister," she said to me.

We walked the few blocks to the apartment house where the Lekos family lived, carrying the basket between us. Their apartment house was not as nice as ours. It was old, dingy, dirty, and had no elevator. They lived on the fifth floor. By the time we reached it, we were out of breath.

"Ring the bell," my sister whispered.

"You ring it; you're taller," I said.

She rang the bell. Presently, Mr. Lekos opened the door. He was wearing the pants of his tuxedo and a sleeveless undershirt. A pair of bright red suspenders seemed to shore up his belly, like a drum before him. He was surprised to see us. He glanced at the basket we were holding. He scowled.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Mr. Lekos," my sister said.

"Yes, yes," he said, looking at the basket.

My sister offered it to him. "It's for Christina," she said, holding the basket in front of her with both hands.

Mr. Lekos looked my sister sternly in the eyes. "What has the basket?" he demanded.

"A turkey!" I cried happily.

He faced me sharply. "A turkey?" he said, stunned. "A turkey?"

"For Thanksgiving." I said.

Mr. Lekos looked from me to the basket to my sister. Then he stepped back sharply. "This is charity," he said with resounding disdain. "Pantelis Lekos does not accept charity from anyone!"

He slammed the door in our faces.

After that, we saw the Lekos family only in church, and that only from a distance. Once, my mother tried to talk to them after the service, but Mr. Lekos turned his back on her. For a few years we sent them cards at Christmas and Easter, but they were never reciprocated. Pantelis Lekos' pride proved stronger than my mother's Christian charity in the end. Eventually, they moved away. We never saw them again.

In all those years since 1935, I've lived with the silent hope that, someday, there'll come a knock on my door or my phone will ring, and a stranger will say, "Hi, I'm Christina, your sister."

8.

CONSTANTIN

Every time I happen to think of my late father-in-law, I catch myself smiling. Every time my wife, Cal, and I reminisce about him, we alternate between smiles and tears. At times, the tears mingle with outright laughter, especially when we re-read one of the letters he wrote us from Miami Beach, where he spent the last few winters of his life with his second wife, Pearl.

C. Michaelides
Jefferson Hotel
246 Seaview Avenue
Miami Beach, Fla. 33134
Dear Calliope & Taki,

Received your letter today and glad to hear from you in the first letter in Florida. Our trip in the beginning was rough, special in N.J. Turnpike, we only drive 35 M. per H. in the bus. During our trip we chewed the rag quite a while because we had nothing else to do.

Now will try to have a good time in the Sunshine State because among all the senior citizens we realize too that we are at the end of our rope. Since we retired working our only thought is how to enjoy our life. Some people they don't start to have good time until they are ready to go beneath the daisies.

I started playing bocci but I am not so good player. I play yesterday with the Italians and I start to get familiar with them.

Pearl goes every morning to the 10th St. for her Yoga exercises right in front of the ocean. Also there thousands seagals watching them and they expect to get something to eat. The senior citizens they spoil them because they give them bread and different things to eat so they become lazy and they don't go diving to catch fish for food.

My ear is about the same, good in must time, only for two days was little noisy.

Well that is all right now. Regards to all and love to both of you.

Pop and Pearl

Pop was born just before the turn of the century in Constantinople. I say Constantinople, rather than Istanbul, advisedly, for if Pop were to hear me say Istanbul, even in his current heavenly state of being, his reaction would not cause me to smile. No. His love for the Turks would hardly fill a thimble. He

never forgave them for taking Constantinople from the Greeks back in 1453. When World War I broke out, rather than be conscripted into the Turkish army, he took his wife and fled his native land. They made their way to America in 1916, when America held her arms open wide to the needy of the world. In appreciation, Pop became an American citizen.

He had been christened Constantine, after the founder of the Mother of Cities. But Pop spelled his name without the final e in English, as one would spell it in French. That may have been because he had studied French as a youth in *gymnasium*. Personally, I think it was more indicative of his native passion for abbreviation. He was fond of brevity in every form. He was positively laconic in his speech. Where a nod could do, why waste a word? If he were writing a letter, he would conclude it at the bottom of the first page. Not one of his letters to us ran into a second sheet of paper. Inevitably, this philosophy rendered him thrifty. If an old hat was still wearable, why buy a new one? Not that he was a miser. It was just that not spending was a smaller undertaking than spending. Hence his thrift. Hence, too, I think, Constantin, rather than Constantine.

82°
Dec. 19 11 A.M.

Dear Calliope & Taki,

I took your letter today afternoon, just 24 hours after you send her, also your Xmas card. We get 58 so far but we expect another 18.

The weather here today is very good and went to the Recreation Park and I play ball with the Italians. I am the only Greek among them and they keep talking to me Italian, they can't understand that not everybody speaks their language.

The game we play they call "bocci". There big wood balls, 8 of them in two colors, and one small one, so we are two gray four each and we throw the balls trying to go as near we get to the small ball, so as many of one color balls they go near so many points we get, when we make sixteen we win the game and each one pays a dime to the winners.

As for me I will try the Sonotone Co. in Miami to see if they can do anything for my hearing aid. My ear so far so good, not perfect but good enough to hear everything.

One of the Florida papers they took photograph when we were playin bocci and soon they advertise I am going to send you one. I was in the picture with another 3 Italians.

Yesterday I went suiming because was 80° and I real enjoy the water.

So many visitors they come here all most all the hotels they put out signs "no vacancy". We walk in the Lincoln Road and we count the mink stoles.

Well that is all right now. Regards to all and our love to both of you.

Pop and Pearl

Pop was a small slight man, of, yes, an abbreviated stature. He had

straight black hair and a brief, Hitlerian mustache. When he removed his glasses and combed his hair down at a slant over his forehead, the resemblance to the late, unlamented German dictator was striking. He wore that mustache most of his life — until, in fact, he married his second wife, Pearl, who was Jewish.

My first mother-in-law was as unlike Pop as any wife and husband could be and still be married to one another. She was large, flamboyant, and overwhelming. She eclipsed Pop. She was always the life of the party, always the social jester, and always made Pop the butt of her humor. "Costo!" she would command him in Greek, "Make the Hitler!" Obediently, Pop would rise, remove his glasses, take a small comb from his breast pocket, comb his hair down on his forehead and give a triumphant "Heil Hitler!" salute to the unfailing amusement of their friends.

It was hard to believe that their marriage had been the outcome of great love and near tragedy. They fell in love as youngsters in Constantinople. He came from a wealthy, land-owning family, while she was the daughter of an impoverished professor. In the rigid social code of the times, they soon found themselves in a latter-day Montague/Capulet scenario. Their love was hopeless. So, one day, they took the ferry to nearby Prince Island in the mouth of the Bosporus. They embraced fondly at the foot of a majestic pine tree and proceeded to commit suicide by poison. But the quantity of the lethal drug they took proved to be insufficient — perhaps because of Pop's innate sense of economy — and served only to render them comatose. They were soon discovered, revived and taken home. This tragic turn of events convinced their families of the depth of their love, and they were allowed to marry.

Pop ran a one-man flower shop in the Washington Heights section of New York. Typically, he called it "Costos Florist" without an apostrophe, considering even that a saving of sorts. My mother-in-law worked for one of the leading furriers in Manhattan. Even though Pop was in business for himself, she brought home more money than he did — which did little to keep him from being overwhelmed by her. He devoted his life to running Costos Florist, on his feet from dawn till late into the night, sweltering in the heat of New York summers and trembling in winter beside a small electric heater on the cold tile floor of his shop. On the big business days of Christmas, Easter and Mother's Day, he worked round-the-clock with my mother-in-law pitching in. By the time I married their daughter, their life had suffered from routine and resignation. Even their legendary romance had withered.

83°
Thurs. Dec. 24 5 P.M.

Dear Calliope & Taki,

Today the weather was very nice and I went suiming in the Ocean. Last night we walk in the Lincoln Road and we saw all the Xmas decorations.

Tue. I went to the fishing pier and I watch the fellers fishing, so one feller he throw his fishing rod and one of the ducks get caught in the

hook. It was big exitement and they have to pull the line to the pier with the duct together and get rid of her and throw back to the Ocean. With crazy things like that time flies, the old seniors they have nothing else to do. They are not young like me.

Yesterday we went to the Tropical Park race track. Results: $5 Proffit.

Well, went to the Doctor and the only trouble I had was my 10 dollars. He said everything was 100% and no medicines.

Well that is all right now. Regards to all and Merry Xmas to both of you.

Pop and Pearl

Pop's life changed radically with the sudden death of my mother-in-law. In his early fifties at the time, he found himself alone in the narrow confines of his life. Friends introduced him to a few widowed Greek ladies in Washington Heights, whom he dutifully courted and promptly rejected. Pop had become a creature of habit over the years, reluctant to adjust to new people and new ways. The prospect of starting fresh with a total stranger was far from palatable to him. He turned, instead, to a lifelong friend of his wife, a widowed Jewish lady of Washington Heights, and married her.

At first, Cal and I thought religion might turn out to be a problem. It did not. Pop and Pearl reached a pragmatic agreement about that. He never swayed from his Greek Orthodox faith, while she pursued her Jewish Orthodoxy. They quipped that there was no real religious difference between them: They were both Orthodox.

80°
Dec. 26

Dear Calliope & Taki,

It was wonderful to hear your voice yesterday and both of you you wish me Merry Xmas in Greek. I didn't heard the Greek langwich since I came from N. York.

Yesterday was a little windy and almost cold, but today turn out a nice day gain. When the sun comes out, you enjoy sit down near the ocean and take nice breath from far away 3000 miles clean ocean breeze.

The dogs are very lucky with me. I went three times and I always bring some bacon in the house.

The Xmas gift you send us didn't get yet and I hope that is something small because we have not any space in the suitcase to add a large item.

I am sending one of the bocci pictures they avertise in the newspaper. Everybody says I look the most young of all the others.

Well that is all right now. Regards to all and love from both of us.

Pop and Pearl

Within a year after he married Pearl, Pop suffered a heart attack. Typically, it was a mild one — a massive one would have been out of

character. He spent a few days in the hospital, a couple of weeks at home and soon was good as new. He retired from business at once. He sold Costos Florist and went to work for the new owner, part time, on a strictly cash basis which left the Internal Revenue Service in total ignorance of its existence.

Pop's retirement would have been much happier were it not for his lifelong affliction by Meniere's Disease. That incurable ailment curtailed his hearing and caused him unpredictable blackouts. I remember once when he walked out of a supermarket hugging a large watermelon. He was about to step off the sidewalk when the attack hit. The watermelon fell from his hands and broke into jagged green and red chunks, peppered with black seeds, and splattered a large area of the street. Pop sank to the curb and sat down, holding his dizzied head in his hands, like a hurt boy. In time, the blackouts diminished, but his hearing became increasingly impaired, eventually leaving him in the vortex of outrageous sounds which only he could hear.

78°
Sat. 4:30 P.M. Jan. 5

Dear Calliope & Taki,

I received your letter of 3 Jan. and glad that everything on the control down there.

I went to Hialeah race track but I lost 2 dollars after I win 3 races.

At midnight I wake up as usual and see something funny with my ear. I was hearing the little O'clock from far away, when other nights I can't hear not even from very near. Right now my hearing is almost normal, about 90%. Well even I am not so religious but still I got my faith to God 100%. Yesterday when I was in the Church and I beg to God to do something for my hearing which lately bother me too much. Well I believe that God listen to my prayers and so far right now from the clear sky I hear again almost perfect.

Tonight we got party again in the lobby of our hotel. Every Friday the manager put a table and feels with all kind sanwiches and drink and fruit. I watch the senior citizens how fast they grab everything and I got lots of fun. I got tremendous appetite but I behave myself.

Well that is all right now. regards to all and love to the both of you.

Pop & Pearl

Pop and Pearl went to Miami Beach every winter. They would drive down in the late fall and come back unseasonably in February or early March, driven north more by the increase in hotel rates than the calendar. They stopped at the same modest boarding type hotel, euphemistically called the Jefferson Hotel, in the lower part of Miami Beach, where they rented the same room with a kitchenette year after year. On one of their return trips from Florida, Pop caused a six-car accident on 1-A. No one was hurt, but Pop's car had to be scrapped. The accident had made page one of a Florida small-town paper, which gave Pop something to brag about for years. He gave up driving at once. Since Pearl's gifts did not include driving, they took to traveling by bus.

Pearl's few gifts included a talent for sewing, which she used to make outdated clothing do for yet another season. It came in most handy when she altered suits of mine which I handed down to Pop and which he claimed to "inherit." Once he "inherited" a suit I had made in Hong Kong, bearing my name embroidered on the lining. Pop never tired of showing that suit off, proudly opening the jacket and displaying my embroidered name to anyone who would bother to look. My wardrobe became a matter of some interest to him. In fact, he would lay an unabashed, if premature, claim on every suit of clothes I bought the very first time I wore it.

In retirement, Pop realized a mode of life he had not been able to attain while he was active in business — and married to my first mother-in-law. He emerged from the oppression she had exercised over him a free man. With Pearl he was the undisputed boss. His retirement gave him the additional freedom of movement. In spite of his heart attack and his Meniere's, Pop made a largely happy Senior Citizen in the Sunshine State, where he should have retired permanently, had it not been for the fact that he would miss us, his children, in the north.

83°
Jan. 19 11 a.m.

Dear Calliope & Taki,

I just received your letter and beautiful Birthday card. Pearl got a small cake and she put few candles (not all the 76) and we going to celebrate.

The park is very near and I play my favorite game the famous bocci with the senior citizens and I like it too much. I start to get very good in games because I got used all ready to handle the ball and I fix the opposite team the way I like.

Last night I went to the Lincoln Road and then to my familiar bench in front of the Ocean. But all alone there you getting bored. As the Greeks say: even in heaven don't pay to be alone. Quite a few senior ladies they give me the funny eye but I don't pay any attention.

Well that is all right now. Regards to all and love to both of you.

Pop & Pearl

One bleak February morning, we got a call from a doctor in a Miami Beach hospital, telling us that Pop had suffered another mild heart attack, but that he was resting comfortably and would be released in a few days. Then Pop got on the phone to reassure us. His voice was weak and small. He had played too much bocci, he said, that was all. We hung up, apprehensive but not alarmed. When Cal called the hospital the next day, she was told that Pop had expired during the night.

The term was grossly inappropriate for Pop. Pop had not expired. He had died in his sleep. Expired was too big a word for him.

A couple of frantic days followed. Interstate arrangements had to be made. Pearl had to be flown home, and Pop's body had to be shipped by air.

A quirk of fate had put them both on the same flight, her in the coach compartment, him in cargo. Pearl never knew; Pop may have — I don't know. When he finally arrived in New York, it turned out he had come straight from the hospital, in his pyjamas. Once again, he inherited one of my suits. He looked just great in it, even though Pearl had not had the time to take it in for him.

His friends flocked to the funeral home. We did not ask that they contribute to charity rather than send flowers. Pop, we knew, would much prefer the flowers. As a florist, he measured the success of every funeral by the flowers the deceased received. He would count each wreath, spray, and arrangement and enter the total into a mental ledger as his final assessment of the net worth of the dearly departed. Had he been able to count his own, he would have been pleased indeed. I counted twenty-three pieces.

We buried Pop on a frigid, snowy day. Only a few people braved the weather to be at his graveside. Even fewer attended the traditional Greek fish-and-wine feast for the forgiveness of his soul afterwards. We had arranged — and paid for — fifty persons. About a dozen showed up. The waste was an unbecoming memorial to Constantin Michaelides.

When we got home, we found this letter from Florida. It read:

49°
Fri. Feb. 16 3 P.M.

Dear Calliope & Taki,

Believed or not, we walk in the street with overcoat. I play bocci with overcoat. The only thing we don't have here is the snow. But if the weather keeps like that I am not surprised will have the snow here too. The streets there isolated the senior citizens they can't come out. We burn the gas stove in the room to keep us warm. I sleep with three blankets and flannel bezamas.

Glad to see you had a good time in the Island of Aruba. Also received the map you send us, I try to find the Island of Aruba but no success. You had no luck in the gambling casino but that is the way you can't have luck always. Just like they say, What you want egg in your beer?

I keep watching the paper every day about the weather in N. York. I don't want any snow on the ground when we come down there.

Well that is all right now. Regards to all and love to both of you.

Pop and Pearl

Pop's final resting place was a duplex grave, which he had chosen to share with his first wife. I often wonder how Pearl felt about that. I wonder, too, how Pop must feel about it, even though, as the second and last occupant of the grave, he reposes in the upper tier.

9.

CLEON

The doctors always said that my brother Cleon would die when he was seven or fourteen or twenty-one. There was no chance he would live beyond the age of twenty-one. He had contracted rheumatic fever within a year after my parents brought him to this country from their native Greece, when he was two or three. The rheumatic fever in turn caused a rheumatic heart, and Cleon was doomed to be a semi-invalid until he died at the age of seven, fourteen or twenty-one.

I wasn't aware of it at the time, but we were poor in those days of the Great Depression. We lived in a walk-up cold-water flat. When we needed hot water, we would light the gas jet under a white porcelain tank that stood upright in a corner of the kitchen. More often than not, we made do with lukewarm water. We even had to ration our use of electricity. We would put a dime in the slot on an electric meter next to the hot-water heater and have lights for an hour or so. My mother, who was a seamstress, did piecework at home, as she had to be on constant call for Cleon. Often she had to work late into the night in a job. Rather than waste money on electricity, she worked by candlelight. Sometimes, when construction work was being done in the neighborhood, Mama had my father go out and borrow one of the warning kerosene lamps posted at open ditches and work by its ample, amber light. Papa worked in a flower shop owned by a fellow Greek immigrant. Flower shops were round the clock sweatshops. Papa worked from eight in the morning until ten at night, longer on holidays, seven days a week. Life was little more than work for Mama and Papa. With a dying boy and a growing girl to provide for, they barely made ends meet.

Cleon looked like Mama, I like Papa. Mama was a large person, big boned and peasant-heavy, yet brimming with energy and tension. She was always doing something: sewing, baking, cooking, washing. She had a broad face with live, electric eyes and a disarming dimple on her chin. Cleon had the same keen eyes and the same engaging dimple that forever absolved him from guilt. He was full of her boundless energy, which, because of his ailment, he could not release. That left him edgy, quick-tempered, frustrated. I was made in the same image of my father: long and skinny with straight listless hair, round, somewhat limpid eyes and a natural tendency, like him, to acquiesce. As a result, Papa and I were, in a sense, overwhelmed, physically and otherwise, he by Mama, I by Cleon. Papa and I were cast together by default.

"Hey, Shrimpy," Cleon said when I got home from school. He was in the

kitchen, shooting pool on the miniature table Mama had bought him for Christmas. He was hunched over the table, taking careful aim with the cue stick, his back to the kitchen door where I was standing.

"What?"

"I want some bubble gum."

"O.K.," I said. "I'll go get some, but first I have to go to the bathroom."

"I want it now," he said, shooting and springing up to take in the new positions of the balls on the table. "Right this minute."

"But Cleon, I have to go."

"Right now Aspasia."

"Then get it yourself," I said.

"I can't. I'm sick."

He had been home from school for three weeks. He was in the checkered green and black bathrobe he always wore when he was home sick. He had been bedridden. Only in the past few days had the doctor allowed him out of bed.

"O.K.," I said. "Where's the money?"

"Ask Mama."

"You ask Mama, Cleon Papadakis. You want the gum."

He faced me for the first time. He came over and grabbed me by the hair. "I said *you* ask Mama," he said.

He pulled my hair till I screamed. Mama rushed into the kitchen. Cleon let go of my hair, fast.

"What runs?" Mama said in Greek. "What have you two?"

"Nothing," I said. "Give me a nickel to buy bubble gum for — him."

Mama waited. "What do they say?" she singsonged.

"Please," I said.

Mama gave me the money. I dropped my books and went to the corner for gum.

"That's a good girl, Shrimpy," Cleon said when I got back. "Wanna piece?"

I took a piece.

"Wanna shoot some pool?" he said.

"After I go to the bathroom," I said.

In spite of all the fights we had, Cleon and I were friends. I liked my brother. I admired him. He was smart. Even though he missed a good deal of school, never once did he get left behind. When he was bedridden, I would bring home his homework, and he would devote himself to it with zeal. When he went back to school — at times a month later — he was right there with the best in his class.

The periods of his confinement were trying, fraught with loneliness and boredom. He crammed the long hours of his days in bed with a variety of activities and hobbies. He did his schoolwork. He read magazines and the Tom Swift books and the funnypapers. He played with his jigsaw puzzles. He had a contraption for making sun pictures that faded into overexposure within the hour. By the time I got home from school, he was at the brink of despair. He took it out on me. I had to put his room in order, play games with him, serve him hand and foot.

We shared a bedroom at the back of the apartment. Cleon's bed was situated with the pillow by the one window of the room so that he could make his sun pictures. Mine was on the other side with my head beside a large radiator that hissed and clanged all winter long. But in that dingy room, our nights were sometimes filled with a singular intimacy.

The radiator by my head gave a loud clang. I awoke with a start.

The stars were strewn in studied profusion across the sky outside Cleon's window. On the wall over his head, the night light, hanging in front of the ikon of Christ in a crown of thorns, sputtered.

"Shrimpy . . . are you awake?"

"Yeah."

"Know what?"

"What?"

"I'm gonna die."

"Who said?"

"Everybody. If you have rheumatic fever, you die by the time you're seven, fourteen or twenty-one."

"You mean you could die next year?"

"No, not next year, maybe when I'm fourteen."

"Cleon, what happens when you die?"

"Nothing. You just die — and you never come back."

"Never?"

"Never."

We were silent. The radiator hissed one long hiss. The stars twinkled. I got out of bed and went barefoot to my brother's. I hoisted myself onto it, dangling my feet. I reached out and took his hand.

"Cleon, please don't die," I cried.

Cleon laughed. "O.K., Shrimpy. If you don't want me to die — maybe I won't."

I pulled back his blanket and got into bed beside him. I slept with him that night, my arms tight around him.

We always had a pet in the house. Pets helped keep Cleon company. Once we had a rabbit we called Asproulis, which means "whitey" in Greek. Asproulis lived in the bathroom. Mama hated him. She couldn't stand the sight of the black pellets he kept dropping everywhere. Cleon loved Asproulis. Every day we would go to the neighborhood grocery store and get throwaway lettuce leaves and carrots for him.

Papa liked Asproulis too. He enjoyed playing with him — when Mama wasn't around. He would feed him out of his hand and pet him and make funny faces at him. One Sunday morning, Papa was reading the Atlantis in the parlor, while Mama prepared the picnic basket for our outing to the beach. Asproulis hopped over and sniffed at Papa's pants leg. Papa told him to stop, repeatedly, but Asproulis persisted. Suddenly Papa stamped his foot hard on the floor and let out a loud yelp. Asproulis jumped four feet in the air and vanished into the bathroom. He hid in a dark corner behind the bathtub, shak-

Ann Wolfolk

ing like a leaf. He refused our entreaties to pick him up and pet him, so we left him there and went to the beach.

When we got back, Asproulis was stretched out on the bathroom floor. He was very long. I reached down and touched him. He was stiff.

"What happened to Asproulis?" I said.

Cleon hung his head. He looked drawn and grim. He said nothing.

Mama said, "He had a heart attack." She looked relieved.

Papa smirked stupidly. He looked guilty. "The God took him," he said.

Cleon folded and stuffed Asproulis into a shoe box. We took it to an empty lot. Cleon dug a hole and lowered the box into it. We covered it with dirt.

"Asproulis died," Cleon said.

Illness made a rebel out of Cleon. He lived under so many restrictions that countermanding them became second nature with him. He was not allowed to skate, but he thought nothing of borrowing his friends' skates freely. He managed to persuade Mama to buy him a bike, but he was not allowed to ride it except on Sundays, when it did overtime. He was not allowed to take gym at school, but he made a tireless outfielder at stickball. He was not allowed to go swimming, but who could keep him out of the water when we went to the beach? Certainly not Mama, who, openly admitting defeat, had bought him a tank suit and cut a round hole in the front so that the sun's curative rays could find his sick heart. He was not allowed to climb stairs, but he had no choice since we lived in a walk-up. On one occasion, he got himself a job delivering heavy jars of crystalline water for an itinerant vendor on a horse-drawn cart. The job kept him running up and down stairs after school. That night, I had the good sense to snitch on him. Since he could not be spanked, I took the beating for him, as I always did, and Mama had a heavy hand.

My brother Cleon fooled all the doctors. He died at an age that was not a multiple of seven. He died on February 10th, 1932, when he was twelve. He died at dawn.

His moans woke me up. He was writhing on his bed, grunting with pain, grabbing for breath. I bounded out of bed and rushed to my parents' room. I flung the door open without knocking.

"Mama! Papa! Come quickly! It is the Cleon!"

They scrambled to their feet, a startled pair of ghosts in their long nightgowns, and darted out of the room. Cleon lay perfectly still, staring.

"The doctor! Mersina, the Doctor — in the name of the God!" Papa cried, but Mama was already gone.

Papa sat on Cleon's bed, picked up the frail body of his son and cradled it in his arms. I sat next to him on the bed. Cleon's head rested on my lap. Papa started to cry, softly.

Suddenly Mama burst into the room with the doctor in tow. She took one, wild, unbelieving look at the three of us.

"No!" she gasped. "No! No! No!"

She threw me violently aside and snatched Cleon from Papa. Papa got up

and drifted away. Mama placed Cleon gently on the bed and lay down beside him. She hugged and kissed him. "No . . . No . . . No . . ." she kept saying, covering his face with kisses. Cleon continued to stare.

"Mrs. Papadakis . . ." the doctor said, placing his hand on her shoulder.

He examined Cleon perfunctorily. He reached down and closed the staring eyes.

"I sorrow much," he said, leading me to the parlor.

"What happed to Cleon?"

"The God took him," Papa said.

The undertakers came in the afternoon. There were two of them, in black suits. One of them carried a suitcase and a large folding table; the other, two empty gallon jugs, one in each hand. They went into the room where Cleon was and shut the door.

Mama had put on a black dress. Her long hair came loose and rested like a white shawl on her shoulders. Her face was swollen and red. Her eyes bulged. She was crumbled in a corner of the parlor sofa. Papa wore a black suit and a shiny black tie and a black armband. He sat at the other end of the sofa. From time to time, he would dab his eyes with a black-bordered handkerchief. Mama had found a black dress for me, too. I sat between them, my eyes riveted on the closed door to Cleon's room.

The door opened briefly. One of the undertakers in shirtsleeves and a vest made a fast transfer into the adjoining bathroom, closing the door behind him. But he was not fast enough for me. I saw. I saw Cleon stretched out on the folding table on his back. He was naked. His arms dangled from either side of his body. Behind him, a thick rubber hose led into one of the gallon jugs on the floor. The jug was slowly filling with blood. The undertaker in the bathroom flushed the toilet. He flushed it again. He opened the door and slipped out silently and fast. This time I saw the other jug, now empty, in his hand before he disappeared into the bedroom.

He did that several times. Finally Mama caught on. She sprang to her feet. "They are spilling the blood of my child in the toilet!" she cried.

Papa was at her side. "Mersina . . . Mersina . . . . Come, come, my golden one . . . . Do not do so . . . ."

Mama stopped breathing. She turned gray. Papa shook her. He slapped her across the face until she caught her breath. He forced her back to the sofa and held her there.

I threw up on the parlor carpet.

Cleon was laid out in his bed. He was dressed in a gray tweed suit. It had been his first suit with long pants. Two huge candles on brass stands burned, one at his head, the other at his feet. The ikon of Christ with the crown of thorns was placed on his chest.

The priest came in his flowing black gown and intoned some prayers and chants and burned some incense, filling the house with smoke and the sweet smell of burning *livani.* The house smelled like church. People kept drifting in and out all day. That night I slept with neighbors.

Mama let me in the next morning. She was in a trance. She followed me

into the parlor. Papa was in Cleon's room, crumbled in an armchair, his eyes fixed on his reposing son.

I turned to Mama. She was staring fiercely at me.

"Why? Why, my God?" she muttered, turning her angry eyes heavenward, the bloodshot whites showing. "Why did you take my child and leave me with a daughter?"

Having spoken the words, she realized what she had said. She clapped her hand to her mouth. She opened her arms wide and enfolded me tightly in the blackness of her bosom.

The funeral was gruesome. Mama was like a mad woman. She wailed. She beat her breast. She pulled her hair till she screamed with pain. In church, when the priest sang the beautiful, "Come render the last embrace," Mama almost knocked the open coffin off its carriage. At the gravesite, she had to be restrained. She broke loose and rushed towards the gaping grave, bent on throwing herself into it. Some one stopped her in time. Undaunted, she jumped lithely and grabbed hold of the overhanging branch of a nearby tree, dangling like a huge black bat over the grave. It took several men to pry her loose.

They had to prop her up as the gravediggers filled the hole with dirt. Papa stood next to her, dabbing his eyes with a black-bordered handkerchief.

Cleon had died.

Each Christmas since 1932, I make a solitary pilgrimage to the cemetery to place a blanket of pine branches on my brother's grave. My parents, who have long since died, too, are buried in Greece. Since my husband and I have not been blessed with children, I feel that Cleon is the only family I have.

His grave is marked by a small marble cross. A photograph of my dead brother is mounted in the marble where the arms of the cross meet. I am grateful for it. Remarkably preserved in its outdoor album through the years, it depicts my brother just before he died in the same tweed suit in which he was buried. A cap of the same material rests jauntily on his head. He looks intensely ahead, his eyes focused on a scene that brings a tight, smug smile to his boyish lips. The touch of life is on Cleon's image still.

I go to the grave Christmas after Christmas, even though the weather is often inclement and even though it's always a problem to secure the pine blanket to the grave. Either the snow is deep, and I have to just rest it there, or else I have to struggle to attach the protective prongs into the frozen winter soil. But I always go.

"What do you get out of it?" my husband, who never goes with me, asks.

"It makes me feel good to go, George," I say, wishing he would drop the subject.

He never does. "And this so-called blanket you cover him up with," he says, not altogether good naturedly, "do you think it keeps him warm through the winter?"

I laugh a little. "Of course not, George," I say, embarrassed "No, not really."

But I don't quite believe that.

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THE FELLOWSHIP'S NEW DIRECTIONS

At a recent Meeting of the Trustees of Fellowship in Prayer, it was decided to give a new emphasis to the program of the Fellowship after the December 1983 issue of the publication appears. The basic publication program will then shift to making grants to writers, artists, and photographers for short book-length projects, and to cooperating financially with other publishers as regards publication.

Concurrently, a new effort will be made to reach out with the spoken word to groups concerned with prayer and meditation throughout the country.

After the December 1983 issue, the monthly publication will become an eight-page quarterly news report on prayer among all religious groups throughout the world, to be circulated gratis among all friends of Fellowship in Prayer. All present subscribers will be reimbursed for the unexpired portion of their current subscriptions and kept on the mailing list.

The Trustees hope that the new program will increase the effectiveness of the Fellowship's work and reflect the excellence of our late editor Paul Griffith's vision. Current friends and subscribers will be of central importance to the program.

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